

of home and family and safety by ThePackWantstheD

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Brother-Sister Relationships, Domestic Fluff, Family Fluff, Found Family, Gay Male Character, Gen, Implied/Referenced Child Abuse, M/M, Not Season/Series 03 Compliant, Post-Canon, Slow Burn, Steve isnt even going to show up for a while this is mostly a fic about Billy, The Upside Down

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Characters: Billy Hargrove, Joyce Byers, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Original Male Character(s), Steve Harrington, Will Byers

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Summary:

When Susan's father dies, he leaves everything he owns to his daughter and granddaughter.

Well.

Almost everything.

He leaves his cabin and his land for Billy, giving him a chance to get away from Neil and finally find what makes him happy, to finally find some peace inside himself.

1. so you've got a cabin in the woods

Author's Note:

- Inspired by [Simple Man](#) by [Straight_Outta_Hobbiton](#).

Billy stood in the doorway, staring at the small cabin laid out in front of him and wondering how he had ended up here.

He'd met Susan's father plenty of times - a couple of holidays in California when Neil and Susan had first gotten together and the old man had still been able to travel, the wedding, a couple more holidays since moving to Indiana and a few times that Neil had made him to go to the old folks home in Chicago where the man lived - but they had never really talked much. Billy had mostly kept to himself on those occasions, let Max and Susan enjoy time with the old man and kept his head low so that he didn't take a beating once they got home.

He hadn't bothered to go to the funeral when the man died a couple of months ago, choosing instead to have a few Neil free days while the rest of the family went to take care of things in Chicago.

So finding out that the man had left him the large plot of land he had just outside of Hawkins, the cabin on the property, and a sizable chunk of money for him to fix the place up and take some time to find a job had been surprising. Even with the note the man had left - talking about noticing how Neil was with him, how he couldn't talk Susan away from him but how he'd left her and Max enough money to leave if Susan ever got the courage, how Billy wasn't his grandchild but he couldn't bring himself to leave a kid like him with a man like Neil - Billy couldn't really wrap his head around everything he'd been given.

But that didn't mean he wasn't thankful for it or that he wasn't going to take the opportunity to get away from Neil now that he was eighteen and had graduated high school.

"Where are we starting?"

Billy glanced around the dusty cabin, trying to figure out how to answer Max's question. She was hanging around because he'd offered to take her wherever she wanted for the summer in exchange for helping him clean.

The cabin was in pretty good shape as far as repairs went, apparently Susan's father had a guy come out to do all of that even though it had been years since he'd been in the proper shape to spend the winter there like he used to, but it was dusty and dirty. Not so much so that Billy felt like they couldn't do it themselves, but enough that Billy definitely wasn't bringing any of the stuff he had in the car into the cabin yet. There wasn't very much stuff, but that just meant that he was even more serious about making sure that he didn't ruin what there was.

"I have no idea," Billy told her. He'd taken one of Max's hair ties in order to keep his hair from getting in the way or getting covered in dust, but now he was sort of regretting that. Playing with it, tugging on the ends and curling it around his fingers, had always helped him think, but that was more difficult to do once it was put away. He needed to get the place sorted out enough that he could bring his mattress, the one thing his father had bought that Susan managed to convince the man to let Billy keep, without thumping it down on a pile of dust. "Scrubbing the floors I guess?"

"You have a bucket and stuff?"

"I bought a bunch of cleaning stuff last night. Should be in the camaro's backseat, on the floor behind the passenger." He'd stood in the cleaning aisle of the general store for what seemed like ages the night before, trying to remember what his mother used to clean the house when he was child and what he saw Susan using now. He thought he grabbed everything he would need, but he wasn't entirely sure. "Go get it while I run the water."

For a moment he thought she was going to argue, but then she held her hand out. "Keys?"

He dug around in his pockets for a moment before producing them. Holding them above her palm, he said, "*Do not* go joyriding in my camaro again."

"You haven't beat any of my friends up recently. I don't have any reason to go joyriding." She reached up, snatching the keys out of his grasp. Billy didn't fight her on it, just let her take them. He admired her snark a little bit, just hoped that she knew to keep it limited to him rather than taking aim at Neil. With Billy out of the house, there was no telling what might lead to Max becoming his new punching bag. As she bounded towards the door, she called, "I'll be back in a second."

"Fucking better be, shitbird."

The two of them spent most of the day cleaning - both of them getting on their knees to scrub at the floors until the thick layer of dust on them had been wiped away, Max standing on the counters so she could knock spider webs from the cabinet corners and wipe off the top shelves, Billy wiping at the glass of the windows until he could see the property outside. It was hard, the dirt in the most unused areas of the house clung to it's home and refused to leave, and Billy's fingers ached by dinner time, but they managed to get the place clean enough for Billy to feel safe living in it.

When dinner came, the two of them went out to get a pizza since the cabin was too far out of the city for delivery. They took it back afterwards and ate while sitting on the cross-legged floor in the kitchen. They talked a bit as they ate - Billy asking what Max had planned for the week so he knew when she needed rides and teasing her for being a nerd when she told him, Max asking when Billy was planning on going shopping since the place was so empty, both of them teasing each other and laughing as they pushed at the other. It was a nice diner, even if half of the amusement came from antagonizing each other.

There were still a few hours until Max curfew, so once the finished eating she helped him move the stuff in his car into the cabin. The only reason thing he had to move was the mattress, so Billy took that in first while Max directed him up the stairs and through the doorway. Afterwards they moved the couple of boxes that Billy had,

teasing each other about possibly dropping boxes and laughing as they worked.

When everything was inside the house, Billy took Max back to the house.

If they lingered in the car together once they got there, then neither of them mentioned it.

They didn't think that they had ever really been siblings, not the way that the Byers' boys or the Wheeler kids or even Dustin and Steve were, but it was strange for them to be separating now instead of going into the house together. It was strange for Max to think about not arguing with Billy over how long he spent in the bathroom after Neil had left and it was strange for Billy to think about Max not bursting into his room to ask for lunch or a ride or any of the other things he helped her with now that they weren't at each other's throats twenty-four seven.

But Max's curfew was quickly approaching, so Max ran into the house and neither of them mentioned that they were maybe going to miss living with each other.

"Hey, is Harrington picking your other friends up today?" Billy asked.

"I don't know. He's probably getting Dustin at least," Max said. It was about a week after Billy had moved out to the cabin and the two of them were parked outside of the Starcourt Mall. It was one of the outings with Max's friends - boyfriend, really, since Billy knew these plans were just with Lucas - that she'd asked him for a ride to when helping him clean. "Why?"

"I need to go pick up some stuff for the cabin. I was hoping that he could give you a ride home since I'm not sure when I'll be done."

"Oh." Max was quiet for a moment before asking, "What are you getting?"

"Furniture mostly. A table and some chairs, kitchen stuff so I can eat

something other than pizza, a dresser, and maybe a coffee table. Possibly a bed frame since I'm getting sick of sleeping that close to the ground." Billy shrugged, "Few other things maybe."

"You don't need help with that stuff?"

Billy felt his stomach drop. He would never tell Max that he wouldn't mind having her at the cabin since it was empty and lonely and he sort of missed her. So her asking, even as roundabout as she was, to come over didn't really bother him. What did bother him was the idea that Max wouldn't want to be at the house - the house where Neil Hargrove was with his poisonous words and his heavy fists.

"Max," Billy said, his words coming out urgent as his stomach turned. "Don't you have to be home after this?"

"Not really." She was looking away from him, focusing out the window, "Mom and Neil aren't going to be home until late tonight. Helping you with furniture just seems better than waiting around for them to come home."

Lonely, he thought. Not beaten or injured. Just lonely

Something in Billy's chest loosened, a knot in her stomach coming apart at her words.

He took a deep breath before he spoke again, making sure his voice steady and back to normal, "I don't care if you want to come furniture shopping with me. But if I'm waiting to go until you're done here, you're stuck with me until I get everything I need. I'm not quitting halfway through because you decide you're bored."

Billy waited around the mall while he waited for Max and Sinclair to finish their date, doing his best to make sure he walked in the opposite direction if he saw the two of them in front of him. He used the time to look at clothes and records, deciding not to buy anything because he didn't want to dip into the money Susan's father had left him even if nothing he was looking at would put a dent in his bank

account, before going to buy himself lunch from the food court.

By the time he finished his pizza and milkshake, Max had slid into the seat across from him with a small smile on her face and a little bag in her hand. Billy thought about teasing her about her little boyfriend buying her a gift, but had decided in the end that it wasn't worth riling her up if they were going to be spending the afternoon together.

Furniture shopping with Max wasn't as bad as Billy had been expecting it to be. They fought over some things, but mostly the two of them had similar taste. They picked out a small black table while making fun of a white one with roses engraved on the edge for being too grandmotherly, Max picked out a set of black chairs with red cushions that Billy thought looked sort of cool, and Billy decided to get a simple black leather frame from his bed while the two of them had an argument over whether or not waterbeds were cool (Max thought they were, but Billy had tried having sex on one before and knew how much they sucked even if he wasn't willing to explain his sex life to a thirteen year old). Max tried to convince Billy to buy a bunch of polka dotted cups until Billy offered to buy one her to use while she was around while refusing to buy anymore, they argued over whether or not it was too much to buy dark colored plates given the color of the table and eventually settled on white-and-yellow striped ones even though Billy thought they didn't suit him, and they went down each of the aisles having a conversation about which of the utensils in front of them were actually necessary for cooking and which ones would just end up sitting unused in a drawer.

The trip ended up taking longer than Billy thought it would since Max was around to remind him of things he would have forgotten otherwise, but they still had time afterwards for Max to come to his place.

Max wanted to help him put the furniture together, but Billy figured that her assistance with that would end up to them actually digging into each other rather than arguing teasingly so he sent her to wash the dishes they had bought and put them away once she'd dried them.

Billy turned the boombox on while they worked, agreeing to put on

the Michael Jackson album they both liked instead of starting the all too familiar argument about Led Zeppelin and Metallica.

Instead of conversation their time was punctuated by Max belting out lyrics to Beat It and Billy singing along with Billie Jean and both of them getting distracted as they danced to Pretty Young Thing.

And when he took her home, sure to get her there before Susan and Neil would get back, Billy swallowed down the awkwardness that came with sharing his feelings and told her that she was welcome to come to the cabin anytime she didn't want to be home alone.

"I think you might have *over-smashed* them."

Billy let out a small hum, glancing between the chicken breast in front of him and the picture in the book in front of Max. He could admit that he'd maybe gotten a little aggressive with the mallet, but he didn't think that it looked too bad.

"Nah," he told her. "I think we're good."

"You're sure?"

"No, but we might as well keep going. What's next?"

Max hesitated for a moment, looking skeptical, before looking down to read their next instruction.

The two of them were trying to make the lemon chicken recipe written in the cookbook Billy had borrowed from the library. He'd never really cooked for himself when he'd lived with Neil, his father was a firm believer that it was 'women's work' so Billy had never done anything more involved than a grilled cheese sandwich, but he'd learned in the years between his mother and Susan that he really, really didn't like living off sandwiches and canned soup like he had when it was just him and Neil.

So now he was trying to learn how to cook.

He and Max wrote down what recipes they thought looked good enough to try the day before and then Billy had gone shopping while

Max was at school. He had a couple of staples that had been getting him by in the few weeks since he'd moved in, but now the kitchen was stocked with the ingredients needed for about a week of planned out meals.

"Place flour in a shallow dish then dredge both sides of chicken breasts in flour, one at a time," Max read. She looked back up, saying, "That just means to coat both sides of them, right?"

"Yeah." Billy pointed towards the cabinet near Max, "Get in there and grab one of the glass dishes we bought."

Following directions Max reached out to open the cabinet in question where they had put all of the pots, pans, dishes, and cookie sheets once they'd bought them. He watched her as she reached for one of the dishes, making sure that she could grab it and move it without injuring herself or breaking the dish. The dishes weren't too heavy so he didn't think it would really be a problem, but Max had to pop up on her tip-toes in order to grab the dish and it would be easy for her to fall if she wobbled.

"Can I grab the flour too?" Max asked as she passed the dish down to him.

Billy took it from her with careful hands. "Can you reach it from there?"

"Yeah, I just have to move a little left."

She didn't wait for his approval before shifting a little to the left. Reaching for the cabinet above the stove where Billy stored the flour and sugar had her hanging half off the stool he'd gotten for her, but she was leaning towards him so it was easy for him to reach out and set his hand on her leg to steady her. She looked down at him for a moment, surprised as if she thought he would just let her fall and bust her head open, before focusing on her task. Once she had it in her hands, she passed it down to Billy. He set it down quickly, making sure she was fully on the stool again before letting go of her leg.

"Alright," Billy said, turning his attention away from her once she was

settled. He adjusted the dish in front of him before tearing open the flour. "How much flour does the recipe say we need?"

"One-third cup."

"I have no idea where we shoved the measuring cups, so I'm just gonna pour and hope we get it right."

Neil and Susan had always been gone a lot, so Billy wasn't really surprised that Max ended up at the cabin more nights than she didn't. She didn't usually start there, but when he went to pick her up from whatever she was doing with her friends, she would ask if she could come to his place for a while and Billy didn't mind having her around as much as she'd minded back when he lived with Neil so he never objected.

What did surprise Billy was how much he enjoyed cooking - and how much he enjoyed cooking with Max specifically.

It was sort of stupid since it wasn't like Max did much, usually just grabbed dishes and ingredients when he asked since he wasn't comfortable letting her chop vegetables or cook things even if she was old enough to handle knives or a stove without doing something stupid. But there was something fun about following her through the aisles of the library as they looked for the next cookbook they wanted to try, about the mirrored looks of fear that they'd exchanged when they realized how daunting *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* was upon getting it home, about sitting at the table together and debating which recipes in the book they'd picked up that week were actually worth trying. There was something fun about their heads touching as they both tried to read a recipe, about arguing with her about what terms and instructions they didn't know meant, about fighting over which of them got to taste something that was smelling especially good. There was even something fun about eating with her afterwards - the two of them digging into plates of something delicious they had made together or making faces at each other when something tasted horrible, trading stories about their days and

talking about their plans for the next, kicking each other under the table as they made fun of each other.

In a weird way, Billy found that Max felt more like his sister now that they didn't live together than she had when they did.

Notes for the Chapter:

1) Hello everyone! This story was inspired by [Simple Man](#) by Straight_Outta_Hobbiton because I love that fic but also I want six thousand more fics of Billy living in the middle of nowhere and being happy finally. I was also inspired by Stardew Valley.

2) And shoutout to [CrazyJ](#) for listening to be ramble about Billy in general as well as this au.

3) hair tie, ponytail holder, or something else all together?

2. the flower you've got to let grow

Billy set a glass of lemonade down on the table in front of Max before crouching down next to the chair she was sitting in. "Alright, let me see your face."

She took several long gulps from the drink, draining over half of it, before setting it down and looking properly at Billy.

He reached up, putting his hand on her chin and moving her face around a bit as he looked.

They'd spent the afternoon outside, working on the lawn. Billy had worked on mowing the edges of the property, it was a lot of land and most of the maintenance Susan's father had paid for over the years happened near the cabin, while Max had focused on the area around the house - weeding and picking up sticks and other little things like that.

And for all that Billy was a stereotypical California boy with sun-kissed skin when they lived there, Max had always been a little more sensitive.

"Well, your face is a little burned, but it shouldn't be too bad," Billy said. Her cheeks were pretty pink, but not so much so that she was going to look like a lobster. He let go of her face, brushing her hair back so he could peer at her shoulders. She'd moved her ponytail over her shoulder when they came inside. Moving it out of the way, though, gave Billy a look at the burned skin. He let out a tiny hiss as he saw how dark red it was. "Your shoulders are going to be hurting a bit."

Max turned, peering down at it. "Do you have any aloe?"

Billy hummed, thinking about what he'd grabbed when he stocked the bathroom upon moving in. He'd gotten all of the products he used when showering and taking care of himself, a few things he'd wanted to try but had been too afraid to take into Neil's house, and a fully stocked first aid it.

"I don't think so," he said at last. "Can you handle it until I take you home? We'll stop by the pharmacy on the way and grab some for you to use."

She nodded, reaching to take another drink of her lemonade.

It was a testament to how much the heat had affected her that she wasn't trying to be strong about it, insisting that she didn't need an aloe and that she was going to be fine. Billy felt like he could have kicked himself for forgetting about how hot it was and how it would affect her differently, especially now that they weren't spending all day every day in the California sun. Hawkins was hot as hell in the summer, but it wasn't like it was that way every day and Max had clearly gotten used to that.

When she was finished, still holding the glass of lemonade with both of her hands but not drinking it, she said, "My grandma used to have aloe vera plants."

"Oh yeah?" Billy felt a mixture of interest and worry. He didn't know much about Max's grandmother - the women had died shortly before Max's birth and long before Billy had come into Susan's life - and there was something intriguing about learning more about the people who had lived here before him, but the strange train of thought had him worrying that Max had been even more affected by the heat than he thought. "How do you know that?"

"Grandpa told me." He reached out, tapping the bottom of the glass she was using and encouraging her to take another drink. She obeyed, taking another long gulp before saying, "Before Mom met Neil, we used to come here for Christmas. He told me how Grandma used to keep these big flower boxes on the porch, under the windows so that the flowers could be seen from the window."

"Sounds pretty."

"Mhm. He said she planted aloe vera in the dry months so that she could use it when someone got a sunburn."

"Smart lady," Billy said, thinking about Susan and Max's pale skin. The woman hadn't gotten to meet her granddaughter, so she wouldn't

have known how prone to burning Max was, but she certainly recognized a problem her daughter had and found a way to deal with it. "How you feeling? A little cooler?"

Max took another sip of her drink before nodding.

Billy hummed a bit, wondering what to do. They'd pretty much finished up the lawn, though there was a pile of sticks from Max's cleaning that he had to do something with, so it wasn't like they had to go outside. But he didn't want to heat the cabin up while making her something to eat.

"How do you feel about going to the diner?" Billy asked. "We'll stop by the pharmacy on the way and get you something to rub on your shoulders. Then we can get some food and milkshakes?"

"Ice cream?"

"Yeah, sure."

Billy kept an eye on Max the rest of that evening, but she seemed to come back to herself when they were in the camaro with the air conditioner blasting and by the time they got to the diner she was back to annoying Billy like she usually did. And by the time he dropped her off at the house, filled with chicken tenders and french fries and a double scoop of chocolate fudge brown ice cream, Billy was back to ruffling her hair just to watch her puff up in annoyance.

Still, the whole thing lingered with him the next day.

He found himself looking around the cabin, thinking about the loose windows and how they let hot air in.

He thought about how he could buy a fan or something to bring the temperature down the cabin, but it wouldn't really matter if all of the nice cool air slipped out the windows.

Max wasn't coming over that day since she was headed to the park

with her friends, a place it was better for her to just skate to, so Billy found himself wandering around a hardware store. It must have been obvious that he had no idea what he was looking for, because the owner ended up coming up to him while he was peering at things and asking if he needed help. Relieved to have someone around who knew what the fuck was going on, Billy was all too happy to tell the man what his problem was and listen to his window sealing instructions.

That probably would have been it if not for the woman who came in while he was checking out, asking the man if he had any gardening shears because her husband had broken the last pair and her rose bushes were starting to get out of control. Listening to the brief conversation happening around him, Billy found himself thinking about Max telling him that her grandmother had flower boxes outside of the windows, about how her grandfather had given him the cabin and how maybe there was a piece of the cabin that Billy could give her to remember the man by.

And somehow he found himself asking the woman if growing flowers was difficult.

When he finally went back to the cabin that night it was with two giant L-Shaped planter boxes made of a white wood, several bags of dirt and fertilizer, a basket full of pre-potted plants that the girl at the flower shop insisted were best for the season, and a book on how to take care of various different plants.

"What are those?" Max asked as she walked up the porch stairs.

Billy followed behind her, sipping on the cherry slushie he'd made her bring to him when he picked her up from the mall.

"Boxes," Billy told her, his lips chilled and stained red. He'd taken care of setting the two boxes up in the corners of the porch and filling them with dirt the night before so that they were ready to have the potted plants moved into them.

She shot him an irritated look. "Boxes for what?"

He took another long sip, just to make her wait for it, before saying, "Planting."

"You're planting something?"

"We're planting something." She had turned back to the boxes, obviously curious about them, but now she looked back at him again. "I thought you might like to plant some flowers like your grandma did. I mean...It's my cabin now, but it belonged to your grandparents and your grandpa was the one who gave it to me. We might as well do something to honor them."

Max went quiet, staring at the boxes with something that he couldn't quite pinpoint in her eyes. It was something that was soft and sad while at the same time fond.

He gave her time to process what he had said and what they were going to be doing, to work through how she felt about it.

Billy thought it had been something nice, but if Max wasn't feeling it than he'd return what he could and find someone to give the rest to.

"That sounds cool," Max said at last. Looking up at him again, she asked, "Do we have to go buy seeds now then?"

"Nah, I picked up some potted ones when I grabbed these. The woman who sold them to me said they're all in season and that we shouldn't struggle with them too much just because we're beginners."

"Okay."

"Go inside and find something to wear then." Neil would blow a fucking gasket if Max came home with her clothes covered in dirt. Billy could practically see him snarling about how disrespectful she was being to Susan, about how she would have to learn how to clean up her own messes at some point. About how she needed to learn respect and responsibility. Billy could close his eyes and see the way that Neil would bring his fists down. "You can probably just wear one of my tee-shirts. I think it'll cover your shorts."

Max nodded and started making her way into the house. "I'm taking one of your Metallica tee-shirts."

"Uh no," Billy said, turning his head to call after her. "Try again."

"It's already black! It's not going to matter if I get it dirty!"

"That's not how that works, twerp. Pick a shirt I don't like!"

"Stop liking Metallica and then you won't like the shirts anymore."

"Max! If you come out here in one of my Metallica tee-shirts, I'm going to go fucking ballistic."

"What are you gonna do? Throw some dirt at me?"

"If you think I won't dump this fucking slushie on your head-"

"You'd just be ruining your shirt yourself!" Max called, not even bothering to look at him as she stepped inside the house.

Billy grit his teeth together, finding that he sort of missed the days when Max had been afraid of him. He wished someone had warned him how annoying little sisters could be before he'd started improving his relationship with her.

Max came out wearing one of Billy's old Hawkins High Basketball shirts over her clothing, so Billy was happy about that at least. He'd really locked himself in a corner with everything, determined to prove to her that he really would dump his shit on her while also not really wanting to ruin one of the tee-shirts in question.

The two of them spent the rest of the afternoon working on the boxes set up below the windows.

Max insisted on planning everything out before they started moving flowers from the pots. So Billy searched through the house until he found some paper they could scribble on, an instruction booklet from the table they'd bought which hadn't ended up in the trash for some reason, and Max went through the camaro until she found several different colored pens they could use. Afterwards they sat on the

porch in front of the boxes, Max laid out on her stomach while Billy sat cross-legged in front of her, and drew a layout for the boxes, using a different color for each of the different types of flowers Billy had ended up with.

They argued about whether pink looked best with blue or yellow and if putting the pink and blue together made the yellow and white look dull rather than colorful, and whether they should try to keep the flowers in each box at relatively similar heights.

And when they finally came up with an arrangement that they both enjoyed, they started moving things.

They filled the right box with the blue vincas and pink geraniums, adding in some pretty white evergreen candytufts to balance out the brightness of the colors. The back of the left box was lined with the three sunflowers that they'd bought, with black-eyed Susan's and white cornflower scattered around in front of them.

When they stepped back, standing at the bottom of the stairs and peering at them with dirt on Max's face and Billy's knees aching from sitting on them, they agreed that the colors looked a little unbalanced - but that ultimately both boxes looked beautiful and they were happy with them.

And since the whole thing had been about giving Max a piece of the cabin which would remind her of her grandparents, Billy figured that the only thing that really mattered was that Max liked what they planted.

Billy was sitting in one of the lawn chairs he'd bought with a glass of lemonade in his hand and his sunglasses on his face, watching as Max took care of the flowers. She had a little book in her hand that she'd gotten from the library, something about insects and pests, as she checked to see if they had attracted anything that would hurt the plants.

They hadn't had any problems since planting, but Billy supposed that was partially because the flowers were so new. It was probably a good thing that Max was learning about these things now, though,

since it meant they wouldn't be at a complete loss when something did happen.

"Mom and Neil are going out of town this weekend," Max said, her eyes fixed on the book she was looking at.

Billy hummed. "You going with them?"

"No. Neil said that since you had moved out, t I had to get used to staying home alone."

Something thrummed in Billy's gut, hot and angry. He knew that Neil had left him alone all night when Billy had been Max's age, but he also knew that it hadn't been *right* to leave a kid that young alone for a weekend. And underneath it was a bubble of unsaid concern - because Max had never said anything about Neil hitting her and Billy had never a bruise on her that he didn't know the cause of, but Billy could already see how Neil's attitude towards her was shifting more towards his attitude with Billy.

"You know, you can come over here as soon as you want right?" Billy told her. "I'll drive over to get you as soon as I wake up if you want."

"I know." Max spoke softly as if she was afraid of the answer, "I was hoping you might be okay if I slept over."

For a moment, Billy wondered what it was that Max was so afraid of. He knew now how fucked up it had been that Neil left him alone as often and as long as he had, but that didn't mean it hadn't been exciting the first time. The terror hadn't set in until the house had gone dark and he'd realized just how alone he was.

Regardless of what it was though, Billy didn't like the idea of leaving Max alone period - much less if she was this terrified of being there.

"Susan still had Thursdays off right? And leaves for book club at ten?" Max nodded a bit. "Okay. I'll swing by before that and ask if it's okay." Neil would already be gone for work, giving Billy plenty of time to talk to Susan. He was hoping he could convince her not to tell Neil that Max was staying with him, he knew the only reason Neil didn't kick up a fuss about them hanging out almost every day was

because he thought the only interaction they had was Billy driving her around. Even if he couldn't, he doubted that Susan wanted Max home alone anymore than he did and that she'd find a way to convince Neil that Max staying with Billy was the best option.

"Okay."

Billy watched her for a moment, seeing the way that some of the tension in her shoulders had already drained away and she seemed to be actually focusing on the book instead of just leafing through it.

It soothed some of the burn in his chest.

Feeling just a bit more calm, he said, "Might be time to finally go get a couch if you're going to stay over, though." Couches were big and heavy, so Billy hadn't bothered getting one when he'd first bought furniture for the cabin. They were expensive too, and even knowing that he still had plenty of money left from Max's grandpa couldn't stop him from cringing a bit at the price. "Maybe a couple of blankets and pillows, too."

The next day, Max canceled plans with the boys to go couch shopping with Billy. He tried telling her that she didn't have to, that he was willing to wait until they were done with their nerd things, but she had just shrugged him off.

Instead the two of them spent their afternoon walking through a furniture store, trying their best to find a couch that wasn't covered in flowers or horrible looking plaid. In the end the only thing they liked was a black leather couch that squeaked a bit when either of them sat down on it, which Billy ended up buying because the squeaking was a lot better than having to look at some ugly monstrosity every time he was in the cabin's main room.

Afterwards, they searched around for pillows and blankets. Billy let Max know that she could choose whatever she wanted since it was for her. Once she went back home at the end of the weekend, he'd

just end up folding it and shoving it into the closet in hallway until she needed it again. She ended up grabbing two pillows and a soft, fuzzy throw blanket that was black with colorful hollow flowers decorating it.

When they were finished, the two of them drove back to the cabin where Billy cooked mac and cheese for lunch while they watched the employees from the store move the couch into the house.

On Thursday, Billy went to pick Max up from the house at ten o'clock. And instead of just nodding to Susan when she smiled at him on her way to her own car, he climbed out of the camaro and approached her. He must have been right in guessing that she didn't want Max home alone either, because she'd agreed to let Max stay with him almost immediately after he suggested it. He hadn't even had to use any of the excuses he'd had prepped about how they'd missed each other since Billy moved out or how the two of them just really wanted some time together outside of the camaro.

And when Billy picked Max up from the Dungeon and Dragons session at Wheeler's house that Friday night, because Lucas had asked Max if she would at least give the game a try and Max had agreed because nerds were apparently her type, she had a backpack over her shoulder with everything she needed to spend the weekend at his place.

It was strange to have Max there for so long instead of just having her for a few hours in the middle of the afternoon, but the two of them found a way to make it work and enjoy their weekend,

In the morning, Billy woke up first and pulled down one of the cookbooks, he'd bought a few since he had gotten sick of going to the library for a new one every week. By the time he found a recipe that they'd both like, Max had gotten up and the two of them would eat breakfast together. He made pancakes with chocolate sauce and bananas on Saturday and french toast with strawberries and maple syrup on Sunday. Afterwards, Billy washed dishes while Max went outside to take care of the flowers.

On Saturday afternoon, they both stayed in since Max had spent hours with the boys the night before and decided she needed a break

from them. So Max read one of the books from her summer reading list while Billy looked through the newspaper for possible job openings, because the money he'd been left with the cabin was going to last a while but not forever. At one point they turned the radio on for something to listen to and got horribly distracted singing along with it, but it was nice a nice break from the work they were doing, fun and filled with laughter.

Sunday afternoon, Billy took Max to the arcade. Harrington was late dropping the rest of the group off, so Billy ended up hanging around for a little bit. He beat the high score on the Frogger machine, because while Max was great at Dig Dug Billy had spent many nights hiding out in an arcade playing Frogger while he waited for his dad to cool down, and then watched her play Donkey Kong for a little bit. When he spotted the boys beginning to scramble into the arcade, he handed her the tickets he'd gotten while they were and ruffled her hair before leaving. He really didn't mind having her at his place for the weekend, but he spent most of his time alone now that he lived in the cabin and he sort of missed having time to himself.

In the evenings, Max helped Billy cook dinner. They always cooked with music on, volume turned down so it was a whisper in the background, and when something caught their attention they'd end up singing together as Max sprinkled seasoning over meat or Billy chopped vegetables. After dinner, Max did dishes since Billy did the breakfast dishes. And when she was done the two of them changed into pajamas and sat on the cabin's floor together, playing card games with the deck that Billy had bought. Max was so good at Go Fish that Billy thought she was cheating, while Billy near unbeatable at war, and Rummy turned into an all out battle between them.

And while Billy did sort of miss having time to himself, he also found that when he dropped Max off Sunday night, he sort of missed having her around too.

Notes for the Chapter:

- 1) Hello! I hope everyone is continuing to enjoy this very self indulgent piece.
- 2) chapter title is part of a quote from John Lennon.

3) Billy and Max's planter boxes look a little like [these](#).

4) I'm not sure if all of these plants can be planted in the same boxes or boxes at all, but I did do some research to make sure they all matched Indiana's planting zone and were summer blooming.

3. vegetables and relationships - both need love and attention.

"Did you know you can eat flowers?"

The camaro cruised down Hawkins backroads. The windows were rolled down to let the breeze in, the occupants having decided the fresh air was better than cranking the AC. Billy was driving with one hand on the wheel while the other held a cigarette, grip loose and relaxed. Max was sat in the passengers seat, legs pulled up onto the seat with her while she balanced a book on her knee. They'd put the radio on when they got in the car, leaving Wham! to fill the car even if it wasn't a choice either of them would have made - *wake me up before you go-go, don't leave me hanging on like a yo-yo.*

Billy had picked Max up from Henderson's house earlier that day, the kids apparently having had a sleepover so they could finish up their nerd game. The two of them had made a trip to the library afterwards, looking for a new cookbook to pull recipes from, and now they were on the way back to the cabin until Max had to be home.

"You been talking to kindergartners?" Billy asked, raising his eyebrows as he shot her an amused look. "Cause I'm pretty sure they figured that out a while ago."

"Shut up," Max said. The words lacked any real heat, though. "It's in the book." Billy hummed, encouraging her to go on even as he moved to take a drag from his cigarette. "There's a couple recipes that have them in salads."

Billy let the smoke slip from his lips before asking, "Any that we have?"

"Not really. I just thought it was interesting."

"I guess, but I don't think the idea of eating flowers is very appealing."

Max hummed, going quiet as she focused on the book.

There was a long moment of silence before she said, "What if we grew something that we *could* eat though?"

"What, like vegetables?" Billy glanced over at her as he spoke.

Her eyes were lit in the way they always did when she got an idea in her head. "Yeah! We could put a little vegetable garden at the side of the house."

Billy took a drag from his cigarette, considering the idea. Much to his own surprise he had found that not only did he not mind having the flowers in front of his home, but that he actually liked them. They were a nice, bright pop of color against the dark wood that the cabin was made of. Taking care of them wasn't difficult and it gave Billy something to do when Max wasn't around to occupy him.

"You going to help take care of them?"

"I will." Billy hummed. Choosing to take a drag of his cigarette and make her wait for his answer even though he'd already made his decision. "Please, Billy? We've been doing okay with the flowers. Vegetables probably aren't *too* much harder."

"Alright," he said at last. Out of the corner of his eye he could see her making a triumphant gesture with her hands. He brought a small smile to his face. "Susan is dropping you off at Sinclair's tomorrow, right?"

"Yeah. She said she wanted to meet him."

Billy had quite a few thoughts about that - mostly revolving around a feeble hope that Susan was as good at keeping her mouth shut about Max's little boyfriend as she was at keeping her mouth shut when her husband was hitting him - but he stamped down on all of them. Instead of mentioning any of that, he said, "Then we'll clean up that area of the yard this afternoon and I'll go grab what we need tomorrow while you're with Sinclair. When I pick you up, you can come over and we'll plant whatever I've gotten."

That afternoon was spent working on the yard to the right of the cabin. Billy wasn't entirely certain whether they could plant things directly into the ground or if they'd have to get boxes to plant the vegetables in, so they worked on moving twigs and rocks and trimming down the grass since Billy had been sort of lazy about mowing since doing it upon moving in.

When they were done, Billy shoved Max into the bathroom for a shower while he went to wash his hands in the sink and make them a quick lunch. He didn't really need to feed Max given that she'd undoubtedly had a bunch of breakfast junk food when she was at Henderson's and she had to be home in time for dinner since Susan and Neil would both be home that day. But eating lunch with Max had become the norm since he'd moved into the cabin and it was strange to have her around without sharing a meal with her.

As they tucked into the pasta he made, the two of them ended up discussing what sort of vegetables they wanted to make. Max wanted corn rows and tomatoes and trellis of green beans. Billy didn't really care what they grew, but he made sure to remind her that vegetables had certain seasons so they might not be able to grow everything she wanted and that they were making a small vegetable garden not running a farm.

Once Max finished eating Billy dropped her off back home, promising her that he would do his best to have everything ready for them to plant once he picked her up from Sinclair's.

The next morning, Billy drove into downtown Hawkins and went to the flower shop in the hopes that they could at least point him in the right direction. It turned out that Michelle, the woman who ran the store, sold vegetable plants and seeds as well as flowers since Hawkins was so small. She helped set him up with a couple of potted plants which were ready to move out of pots as well as a couple of seeds that she warned him wouldn't produce anything until a few months had gone by. She pointed out which dirt and fertilizer he would want since vegetables were slightly different from flowers. She added a book to his cart as well, one that would help him and Max figure things out and trouble shoot if they started having problems.

Afterwards she pointed him to the hardware store, telling him that the man who owned the store would sell him some raised vegetable beds which he kept in stock since the two stores were so close.

At the hardware store Billy picked up six medium-sized beds that would fit all of the things he'd bought at the other store. Afterwards he made a deal with the man who owned the store for his son, Tony, to drive the beds out to the cabin since they wouldn't fit in Billy's camaro, even if his backseat hadn't been filled with potted plants.

When everything was settled afterwards, the beds set up in two columns and three rows, Billy filled the wooden containers up with the dirt that he'd bought.

By the time he finished he had just enough time to take a quick shower before he had to go grab Max from Lucas Sinclair's house.

Billy was sprawled out in his chair on the porch, when Max was around he always took the one further from the house so he'd be between her and anyone who might drop by and he sat there even when she wasn't around out of habit, with a novel he'd gotten from the library in his hands and his sunglasses perched on his nose. It was a cool day in Hawkins, an increasing rarity as mid-July started leaning towards August, and Billy had every intention of taking advantage of the ability to go outside without sweating like a pig.

He was in the middle of reading a particularly tense scene when he heard a car coming down the drive. He'd been surprised that there was a driveway the first time he'd come out to the cabin given how much land the cabin was on and how far out of the city he was, but he knew that Susan's father had been a car person so he supposed it wasn't that strange.

Wondering who the hell would be coming out to his place given that he hadn't exactly bothered talking to anyone since graduation, Billy looked up over the top of his book.

He recognized the car coming towards the cabin instantly - it was the little white thing that Susan drove.

He folded his book and set it on the table between the two loungers before pushing himself up in a sitting position. He didn't bother standing up, not when his gut was churning with a mixture of concern for Max and the familiar anger that he felt towards Susan. He didn't think he would hit a woman, but he didn't like having Susan at his home unannounced.

As the car came to a stop next to the camaro, Billy reached up to shove his sunglasses up into his hair so he could see better.

When the doors opened he took just a second to make sure that it was actually Susan climbing out of the drivers side rather than his father before focusing on Max. He dragged his eyes down her body, checking to make sure her hair wasn't messy as though it had been pulled on and there weren't any bruises on her visible skin and that she didn't look upset. There were portion of her body he couldn't see, but not seeing any bruises on what he could was enough for his shoulders to relax just a fraction.

"Hey twerp," he called out. "What are you doing here? I thought you were spending the day with your mom."

"She has to go into work," Max said. She bounded up the stairs without hesitation, because for all that this was Billy's home it had become Max's place as well and she had no reason to feel shy or nervous about being there. "Have you taken care of the garden yet?"

"No, I was going to do it after lunch."

"I'll do it instead!"

"Go for it," he said. "Your watering can is on the counter still." Her watering can was shaped like a snail, green and textured like stone. They kept it on the counter when they weren't using it since it was a cool looking thing.

"Okay!" Susan had reached the top of the stairs now, so Max turned and gave her mother a quick hug. "See you later, Mom." She waited long enough for Susan to squeeze her back before she darted inside the house.

Susan watched her for a moment before looking at Billy, saying, "Is it alright for her to stay? She begged me to bring her over here when I told her I had to go."

"It's fine." Billy's fingers curled around the bottom of the lounge, knuckles going white as his heart thumped in his chest. He hated Susan almost as much as he hated his father. Neil might have been the one to do the beatings, but Susan had been the one to watch in silence. Susan had been the one to choose not to offer aspirin or band-aids or anything, had been the one to quietly let Neil get along with everything he did to Billy just because he wasn't her son. "What time do I need to have her home?"

"I can come get her. You don't have to."

"No. I'll bring her," he said, cutting her off. He didn't want Susan at his house now and he didn't want her back here later. "What time?"

Susan looked like she wanted to argue for a moment. But she must have seen something in his face, because she said instead, "Seven-Thirty would be good."

"Okay."

There was a moment before Susan held the bag in her hand out for him, Billy had noticed the white paper when she'd first gotten out of the car but he hadn't tracked it like a weapon the way he would have if it was in Neil's hands. "Here. Max saw this when we were shopping today and thought you would like it. It's a house warming present."

Billy really didn't want anything from Susan, but he wanted her gone. So he reached out to take the bag, careful not to touch her as he did, and pulled it close to him. "Okay." He didn't look at it, didn't say thank you. He just stared at her, refusing to say anything and waiting for her to leave.

Susan stared back.

For a moment Billy was back at his father's house, waiting for Neil to shove him against a wall and hiss about how he was disrespecting Susan and how he was going to say thank you right this moments.

And then the fog cleared and Billy realized that this was his home, that Neil wasn't here and no one here could shove him into a wall or beat him until he gave in and that he didn't have to do a damn thing that he didn't want to.

He swallowed back the 'thank you' on his tongue, straightened his shoulders, and stared until Susan left without another word.

The item in the bag turned out to be a vase. It was colored a blue-green that reminded him of the California ocean with white bubbles creeping up from the bottom that reminded Billy of the surf crashing against the sand. When Billy first pulled it out of the bag, he could almost feel the water lapping at his ankles and taste the salt on his tongue.

He set it in the middle of the table. He and Max filled it with flowers, usually blossoms from the flower boxes that had been cut off in order to keep them from over growing though sometimes Billy would buy flowers from the shop when he was out grabbing something downtown. It was a nice pop of color, breaking up the blackness of most of the furniture they'd picked out.

Billy looked at it every day and thought about California rather than the woman that he given it to him. Because Billy loved California, missed it so much that he ached with it some days even if he'd decided that staying in Hawkins where he had his own house was better than trying to figure shit out back home, and he didn't owe Susan Hargrove a god damn thing anymore.

The rest of the summer passed by without much fuss, following along with the rhythm that Billy had established since moving into the cabin.

Billy spent most of his mornings alone. He'd wake up later in the day, once the sun had warmed his sheets up so much that staying under

them was too much, because he could sleep as much as he wanted without worrying about Neil bursting in and snarling at him to get his worthless lazy ass up. When he woke up properly he'd make his way into the kitchen to make himself food, moving slow and syrupy because there was no rush to get back to his room or out of the house. Usually he just made himself something simple, eggs or oatmeal or something similar, but occasionally he'd get in the mood something sweet and make pancakes or french toast. He'd spend the rest of his morning lounging on the couch, usually reading a novel or flipping through the gardening and cookbooks that Max had gotten from the library and left in the house.

The early afternoon was usually spent either grabbing Max from one of her friends houses after a sleepover night or picking her up from her place. Usually he dropped her off at the arcade or mall or somewhere else so that she could spend a couple of hours with her friends. He'd find something to do while she was busy and then loop back to pick her up. Almost always, he took her back to the cabin with him until she ready to go back home late that night. They'd take care of the garden when they first got back to the house, sometimes Max did it all while Billy sat on the porch and sometimes they worked together and sometimes one of them did the flowers while the other did the vegetables. When everything was taken care of the two of them would retreat into the cooler air of the cabin. Sometimes Max read from her summer reading list while Billy read a novel, sometimes they ended up looking at books on gardening or cooking, sometimes they played card games or the board games that Billy had bought recently. Either way, it was always a little calmer inside of the cabin. The entire place was a safe haven for both of them, but inside of the cabin in particular seemed to be where they both allowed themselves to relax in a ways that they rarely did outside of it.

If Max didn't have to be home for dinner that day, which she rarely did, then the two of them would squeeze into the kitchen together to cook. They still liked to pick new recipes from the cookbooks they got from the library, or the few that Billy had bothered finding copies of and buying since he liked them, but there were recipes now that they'd learned how to make without looking and which they were familiar enough with to move around each other in the kitchen

without much fuss. Growing familiar with it didn't make it any less fun, though. It mostly just meant that they were more comfortable getting distracted by dancing along with the radio or belting song lyrics into whisks.

Nights in the cabin, after Max had been dropped back off with Neil and Susan, were quiet for Billy. Usually he'd end up putting a cassette with something slow on it into the stereo, propping the door open so he could hear it while he sat out on the porch and stared up at the stars. There was something calming about the quiet of the woods in Hawkins at night, the warm breeze pushing through Billy's hair as the crickets chirped and the fireflies lit up the yard. Sometimes he'd just stare up at the stars until he was ready to sleep, but other times he would push himself up to go back into the cabin to do something with an unusual calm in his chest.

"You know how to curl hair, right?"

Billy had been looking down at his cards, trying to decide whether to ask Max for a three or a six, but he glanced up at her question. Max was staring down at her own cards, but with the sort of focus that spoke of avoidance.

"My hair is permed," Billy told her. "I don't curl it every day."

"I know that," Max said. She looked up at him, sounding and looking a little annoyed. "I just thought maybe you knew how to curl hair."

"I do. I just thought that if you're going to ask me to curl your hair, you should know that I haven't done it since I started perming mine."

There was a moment before Max's gaze shifted downwards again as she asked, "But you can do it?"

"Yeah. It's not that difficult and I did it plenty before perming my hair." Billy let the silence settle again for a moment, waiting to see if she would explain why she wanted her hair curled or actually ask for him to do it. When neither came, he said, "Is this about tomorrow?" School was starting back up the next morning and while Billy might have been done with the Hawkins High, Max would be going for her

first day.

Max shrugged, but the way her shoulders stiffened and her face heated red made it clear he'd hit the nose on the head.

"Alright then," Billy said. He put his cards down on the floor next to him before pushing himself up until he was standing. "You grab a chair and bring it to the bathroom. I'll go look for my curling iron."

"You'll do it?"

"I don't see any harm in it." He reached over, setting his hand on her head and pushing until she was looking up at him. "Look, high school sucks ass, okay? Nothing you do is really going to make it not suck, especially not in Hawkins when everyone knows your shit. But it's also going to be the next four years of your life, so if me curling your hair will make you feel a little more comfortable walking in there tomorrow than that's what we're doing."

"It's not stupid?"

"Oh it's stupid. But like ninety percent of high school is stupid, so really who cares." He let go of her forehead. Something like relief pulsed through him when she kept her eyes on him instead of looking down at the ground again. He knew how bad high school was - knew how bad boys like him made high school for girls like Max who spent too much time with boys, always calling them sluts or dykes - and he would be damned if he didn't make sure that Max was okay, at least on the very first day. "Get up, twerp. Go get a chair like I told you to and meet me in the bathroom."

The two of them spent the rest of the afternoon in Billy's bathroom as Billy worked on Max's hair, because she had a lot of it and it took a while to work through.

As he worked through it, running his fingers through her thick red hair and separating it into sections using barrettes that he had stored for when he needed to work on his own hair, he tried his best to give

her advice to help her through high school.

It was difficult because he knew that the problems she faced were different than the problems he had faced - because Max was a girl, because Max was sort of a nerd, because Max had fire in her veins and a tongue almost sharper than Billy's own. But he did his best to gather up everything that he'd seen and tell her what he thought would help.

Do her shit and keep her grades in check to keep Neil happy and get her places in life, but she didn't need to advertise it to anyone. Billy had graduated in the top ten percent, but he wasn't exactly shoving his A's in everyone's face or trying to act smarter than everyone else.

Hang out with her nerdy friends because nerdy friends were better than no friends, but try to either get along with everyone or teach people quickly not to fuck with her. Billy had always taken a mixed approach - getting along with who he could and not hesitating to pound his anger into the face of whoever asked.

Boys were going to start doing stupid things and talking shit when she put them in their place, so she needed to be prepared to headbutt any boy that put their hands on her without permission and she had to grow a thick skin to roll the rumors off. Billy didn't tell her about the way he'd slept his way around his high schools to make sure all of the rumors were about his skill with the ladies, but he did tell her about Kristy Peterson from California who had walked up to a boy that had lied about sleeping with her and gripped his nuts so hard that her knuckles had gone white while hissing about whether this was he had wanted from her.

Most of all, he told her, come to tell him if anyone needed their ass kicked. Max made a face, Billy catching the scrunching of her features in the mirror as he worked on curling strands on her left side, and said that getting her big brother to step in would only make her seem like a baby. Billy kept his hand on the curl he was working on, but reached out with his other hand to tug on an already finished curl, her hair still hot to the touch, and told her that if anyone was bothering her enough for her to be coming to him then he'd be beating them so thoroughly that they wouldn't have the ability to tell anyone that she'd called her brother in.

What he didn't say was this - Max was more than just his little sister, she was the only family that he had nowadays. And Billy would take down every single person that hurt her without so much as a second thought.

Notes for the Chapter:

- 1) Hello everyone! I hope you enjoyed this chapter!
- 2) It's not mentioned, but Billy is totally reading a copy of Cujo in section 2.
- 3) The vase gifted to Billy from Susan is the blue/green one in [this](#) picture. It's probably not very 80s, but I don't care because I can only research so many little details of the 80s.
- 4) I hope that it's not too obvious that I know very little about gardening and flowers.
- 5) IM SO ANGRY I ACCIDENT CLOSED A TAB AND LOST 2/3RDS OF THIS CHAPTER SO I HAVE TO REWRITE IT SO IM SORRY IF IT SUCKS OR IS VERY SHORT BECAUSE I ANGRY TYPED IT.
- 6) I'm not trying to demonize women in Susan's situation, but I think in Billy's point of view - Susan would be a villain.

4. it takes more than two

"Alright, ladies," Billy said, spotting Max's head of red hair approaching the camaro. "I think it's time to say goodbye." He'd been sitting on the hood of his car in the high school parking lot, smoking a cigarette while he waited for Max to get out when a few of the upperclassmen who knew from the previous year had come up.

"Are you sure you can't stay a little longer, Billy?" Janice Garrett said. She pressed her palms against the hood, leaning into Billy's space. She smelled like some sort of artificial flower perfume, something that made Billy's nose wrinkle now that he was so familiar with the smell of real flowers.

"I would if I could, ladies," he lied. He reached out, pushing some of Janice's hair behind her ear and trying to ignore how much stronger the scent got when he leaned closer. "Maybe next time, though."

Next to Janice, Patricia Longhorn said, voice low and smooth as silk, "You promise?"

"No, but I'll try." Max was getting closer now, Billy could see her face rather than just her hair, and Billy really didn't want to be hanging around with these girls when she got there. Talking with all of these girls after so long interacting with just his sister and the occasional shipowners was exhausting. He just wanted to get Max and get back to the cabin. "Now you ladies get going. I wouldn't want you to be stuck hanging around here any later just because of me."

There was some laughter and murmured goodbyes, but by the time Max reached the camaro all of the girls had scattered towards their own rides.

"Hey twerp," he greeted once she drew close enough. Technically, he wasn't obligated to pick her up anymore. He didn't live in Neil's house so his father couldn't force him to get her and the deal they'd made when she helped him move had expired at the end of the summer. But she'd become his little sister over the last three months and he didn't have a problem with taking her somewhere as long as he could plan for it. "How was school?"

"It was school," Max said, shrugging a bit. Two weeks into things, the shiny newness of high school had clearly worn off.

Billy hummed as he pushed off of the hood. As he walked around to his door, he asked, "Am I dropping you off somewhere or are you coming with me?"

"Coming with you," she said. "All of the boys are doing AV Club today."

"Alright, home it is then."

"Can we put Queen on?" Max asked. She opened the passenger door, tossing her backpack into the backseat before sliding in.

"Yeah, if there's any in here," Billy told her, sliding into his seat after her. They'd taken a bunch of Billy's cassettes out of the car a couple of days ago and took them into the cabin so they could listen to them while cooking after too many nights spent listening to stuff on the radio that they didn't like.

Max leaned forward, pulling open the dashboard and rummaging around. "I left Greatest Hits in here because you took in all of the regular albums."

"Cool, good plan," Billy said. He reached over, putting his hand on her head and pushing her backwards. "But seatbelt first, twerp. You can look for the tape afterwards."

Life didn't change too much once Max started school.

Billy got a job at the autoshop in Hawkins, something to get some money coming in even though his inheritance was enough to get him through for a year or two even when accounting for any unnecessary purchases he might make. He worked during the week, taking the weekends off so he could spend that time driving Max around or just hanging out with her. It was probably a little stupid to contort his schedule around his little sister, but Billy didn't want her to be stuck

at home all day if something happened with Neil.

He woke up earlier than he had in the summer, sometimes because he had the first shift and sometimes because he was giving Max a ride to school so she didn't have to bike in. He'd eat a quick breakfast, sometimes fixing himself lunch for the day out of dinner leftovers before leaving and sometimes deciding he'd just walk somewhere for lunch.

His afternoons were spent working. Slowly, Billy made friends with his co-workers. There was Richard, the older man who owned the shop who ruffled Billy's hair even when there was oil on his hands and who always acted as though the families of everyone in the shop were equally important - even if Billy's family was just his sister rather than a child like the other workers. Then there was Patrick, a man only a few years older than Billy but who seemed to think Billy needed taken care of the same way his three kids did. He was always fussing over Billy's lunches not having enough vegetables and clicking his tongue when Billy came in looking like he hadn't slept very much. And there was Kevin who held a monopoly over the radio in the garage and wasn't afraid to wrestle Billy for changing it, despite all of the tools and dirt they ended up rolling around on top of. And Billy had never really had friends like this before, but he found that he enjoyed the easy companionship that he shared with them a lot more than he enjoyed the pressure of hanging out with boys like Tommy from high school. Billy hadn't exactly been lonely over the summer, not when Max was around so often, but he'd missed the company of people who weren't so much younger than him.

He got out with enough time to get Max from the high school, sometimes with enough time to run home for a shower before he had to grab her. On the days when the boys had AV club, because Max loved her nerdy friends but apparently drew the line at joining them in that, Max came over to the cabin right after school. Usually Billy let her take care of the vegetables and flowers before she started on her homework, giving her a little while to de-stress before she had to go back to doing work. As quizzes and tests started up, though, he started flipping through her books to quiz her while she worked.

Once homework was finished and the plants all taken care of, the two of them would up doing a lot of the same stuff they'd done during the

summer. They played card games and a couple of board games that Billy had bought recently. They talked about the things that Max didn't want to talk to her friends about, about Lucas and her hair and all the other girl things that her friends didn't know anything about which Billy listened to so that she knew he was there for her. They read while the radio played slow songs, belted along with ballads, and dragged each other up from their seats when something good to dance for came up.

They made dinner together, processing into things that were slightly more complicated. They set the fire alarm off for the first time when they got distracted making fried chicken and let the oil get way too hot, leading to Billy standing on a chair with his finger against the button while Max called the fire department to let them know they didn't need to come out. They harvested their cucumbers and pickled them according to instructions in a book Max read, picked their tomatoes and made jars of homemade tomato sauce that Billy gave to his co-workers because they ended up with way too much, argued about whether or not to plant some fruit when the spring came around so they could give jam making a try.

It was simple and routine, but all of it made Billy's chest warm with happiness and comfort.

"I definitely remember having only dropped one of you off," Billy said, watching as Max approached his car with Will Byers on her heels. He was sitting outside of the Wheeler's house, picking Max up after her having spent the night there.

"Will's mom has to work," Max said. Billy wondered for a moment why Will's brother couldn't just take care of him before remembering that Jonathan Byers and Nancy Wheeler had left Hawkins shortly graduation. He didn't really know where they'd went though, and he didn't really care if he was being honest. Neither of them had ever been as interesting as Steve Harrington was and Harrington was still in town. The two of them bumped into each other occasionally when Billy dropped Max off somewhere since Harrington seemed to be the boys chauffeur. "Can he come out to your place with us?"

Billy raised his eyebrows. He was sure his surprise was clear on his

face. "I'm not just dropping him off at his place?" She'd asked him to give Sinclair a ride a couple of times since they'd gotten closer so Billy assumed she was just learning that Billy didn't mind doing her a favor every once in a while, but she'd never asked to bring anyone to the cabin. And it was even more surprising that the first person she was asking to have over was Byers, because he knew that Max was closer to Sinclair and Henderson while Wheeler and Byers made their own little group within their clique.

"Not if you don't mind him coming over."

Billy hummed, letting his eyes slide from Max to Will.

Will wasn't looking at him, his eyes focused on the ground and his hands gripping the straps of his backpack. He was clearly nervous about something, though Billy couldn't exactly figure out why. He'd done some shitty things to Max's friends, back when his anger at Neil had been at an all time high, but he couldn't remember Byers being super involved. He felt like it had mostly been Henderson and Sinclair around for his bullshit.

"Byers," he said. The kid startled, jumping before focusing on Billy. "Is your mom going to be upset if you're at my place?" The kid seemed confused for a second, like he couldn't really process Billy's words because Billy speaking to him was such a surprise, but then he shook his head. "I usually drop Max off at home around eight or eight-thirty. Is that an okay time to drop you off too?"

He nodded again.

Billy watched him for a moment, trying to figure out what the hell was happening in front of him before sighing.

"Alright," he said, because while he still had no clue what was going on he didn't want Max to feel like she couldn't invite people to his place given that she already couldn't invite people back to Neil's place. "Get in."

Despite Will's assertion that his mother wouldn't mind, Billy still dropped by the General Store where Joyce Byers worked to make sure it was fine. She seemed surprised when her son walked in with him and Max, even more so once she heard what Will wanted. But she shook it off quickly, checking that Will really wanted to go over and agreeing once he confirmed. Afterwards, Billy handed Max a ten and told both kids to find some candy they wanted. And once they darted away, he sucked in a deep breath and apologized to Joyce Byers for the way he'd ruined her house while fighting with Harrington. It seemed to be the biggest surprise of the day for her, but she accepted his murmurings about being in trouble with his father and Steve not telling him where Max was with good grace.

By the time the kids were ready to go, each carrying a candy bar and a box of something non-chocolate, Billy was itching with the urge to get the fuck out of there. Apologizing was difficult, especially when he didn't want to tell people about Neil's abuse and when he knew that Neil's abuse didn't really excuse what he had done, and he was more than ready to be away from Joyce Byers' kind eyes.

He expected the kids to run off once they got back to the cabin, but Max grabbed what she needed and directed Will in how to help her to the work. Billy sat in his chair on the porch for a while, watching them and making sure Max wasn't just making Will do her work for her. He didn't seem to mind helping too much, though, so Billy left them and went inside.

When Max came in, carrying a bucket of vegetables she'd picked from the garden and flower cuttings, he had her set the bucket on the kitchen counter. He'd been expecting them to run off then as well, thinking that maybe Max just wanted to do the gardening, but instead Max had just asked if they could play a game. Billy didn't really mind hanging out with the kids if that was what they wanted, so he ended up turning the radio on and sitting down at the table with them to play Monopoly.

Will was quiet at first, but he seemed to open up as the night went on. Gradually he stopped avoiding Billy's eyes and only responding to his question in nods or head shakes to talking openly, even if he wasn't quite as loud as Max was, and negotiating with Billy over trades.

By the time they left the game to make dinner, Billy agreeing to let them keep the board out so they could play after they ate, Will seemed to actually be comfortable in the cabin. There was still some weird things happening, Max and Will exchanging glances or whispering behind his back, but it didn't seem like those were about Will being afraid of Billy so much as it was them keeping a secret. And Billy let them have whatever secret they were keeping because he felt like butting in would only ruin the trust budding between himself and Max.

Even with Will having grown comfortable that night, though, Billy wasn't expecting Will to become a regular guest in the cabin. Somehow, though, that first visit seemed to be the gateway for Will coming over. At first it was only once or twice a week, but then a month had passed and Will seemed to be at Billy's place almost every day that Max was.

Billy didn't really care about it, Will was a good kid and the more time he spent at the cabin the more Billy came to see him as more than just a guest, but he didn't really understand why Will was hanging around. And as he grew closer to him, as Will sat on the cabin floor with dirt on his face and laughter on his lips as they planted herbs into pots for an indoor winter garden and as he learned that Will was going to kick his ass at Scrabble every time the three of them played and as Will asked if he could pick some of the flowers for his mother because he wanted to surprise her with something nice, he started getting worried about it.

Because the cabin was a safe space, so far away from the rest of the world that it was calm and soothing and quiet, and Billy knew why it appealed to himself and Max.

He didn't know why it appealed to Will so much, and he wished he did because the longer he knew him the more he wanted to protect Will from the bad in his life the same way he wanted to protect Max.

"Alright," Billy said, flopping down in one of the dining room chairs. Max and Will were seated on either of them, working on their

homework. Usually he would have let it go, but the two of them had been whispering more than usual today and he had reached his breaking point on it. "What's going on with you two?"

The two of them exchanged looks.

"Nope," he said, shaking his head and drawing their attention back to him. "No more glances and whispers. You two have been doing that since Will started hanging around. It's time you guys explained what's been going on with you."

There was a long moment before Will said, "I like boys." Billy hadn't had any clue what was going on between them, but he could honestly say that he hadn't been expecting to hear that.

"I found out during the sleepover you picked us up from because Mike was talking about his girlfriend and Will got upset and I was the only one that noticed."

Billy knew all at once what had happened after that, why it was that Max had brought Will over that day and why Will had been so nervous and why they'd been whispering so much behind his back. "And so you told him that I like boys."

Max dropped her head, looking down at the table. Her voice was quiet as she said, "Yes."

"Okay," Billy said. "Okay."

He took a deep breath, closing his eyes and wrestling with the emotions flushing through him. On one hand he was angry at Max, because she only knew about his preferences because she'd seen Neil trying to beat them out of him and she should have known how dangerous it was to share something like that. At the same time, there was something to be said about who she had shared it with and why.

"She was just trying to make me feel better," Will said. Billy could hear a sort of frantic panic in Will's tone, as if he thought he'd gotten Max so far in trouble that one or both of them were going to get kicked out of Billy's place. "Because my dad used to call me a lot of

things and tell me how bad it was to like boys and I was already upset because I know I shouldn't like Mike but I do and I just felt worse thinking about what my dad said. But Max told me you like boys too! And then I felt like I wasn't so alone and I wasn't so weird because you're so cool. And then I started hanging out here and it was nice knowing that you were the same as me."

"Okay, okay." Billy took another deep breath. Then he opened his eyes again, looking at the kids. Max's head was still drooped and Will's eyes were frantic and scared. He took a third deep breath. "We're going to sit here and talk about this, okay? Because you've both done something really fucked up, but I understand why you did it."

The kids were good about sitting still and listening while Billy scolded them - telling Max how sharing information like that without his permission wasn't okay, how she could have ended up putting him in a really bad place, and telling Will how it was wrong of him to use Billy without explaining to him what was going on and to start a relationship with him under false pretenses.

And when he thought they both looked suitably ashamed of what they had done he told them what they deserved to hear - that he was proud of Max for seeing how upset Will was and helping him realize there were people like him out there and telling Will that he had no reason to be ashamed of liking boys because there were plenty of people out there who did and there was nothing wrong with him for feeling that way.

When both of them looked a little normal, shaken from being scolded for their actions but perking up under his praise, Billy ruffled their hair and asked them what they wanted to cook for dinner.

Max and Will were a little melancholy the rest of the night, not quite as into cooking as usual and a little quieter than normal during dinner conversation and neither of them talking as much trash as they usually did when they played Crazy Eights afterwards.

He took them home a little earlier than usual since it seemed like both of them just wanted to hide under their covers, but he made sure that when he dropped each of them off he talked to them alone. He walked Will up to the door instead of waiting in the car until he saw the boy disappear into the house, murmuring to him that he really didn't need to be too beat up about everything and that he was still welcome over at the cabin. And when he reached the Hargrove house, he kept Max in the car for a few minutes so she knew that he was still going to pick her up in the morning and that the cabin was still hers as much as it was his.

Billy drove home that night, hoping that both of them knew that while he was angry with them they hadn't lost anything.

Notes for the Chapter:

Hello! I hope you all enjoyed this chapter, especially since it introduced another relationship that I'm always incredibly intrigued by.

5. that which asks no questions and pass no criticisms.

"I come bearing gifts," Billy called out as he pushed his way into the autoshop's front office.

The group of men gathered around the front desk looked up as he entered, Richard and Patrick along with the two guys - Gabriel and Scott - that worked the shop at night incase an emergency popped up since there wasn't really anywhere else for someone broken down in Hawkins to take their shop.

"Is it more tomato sauce?" Patrick asked. "Because my wife loved the stuff I got from you before. It's the first time the girls have eaten sauce like that without picking all the mushrooms out or complaining about the herbs being green."

"Billy makes tomato sauce?" Scott said, looking a little confused. Like the idea of a guy like Billy making tomato sauce didn't quite compute in his mind. Billy didn't really blame him, because he would have laughed in the face of anyone who suggested that not too long ago.

"Yeah. My sister and I have a little garden. We had to find something to do with the tomatoes when we harvested them," Billy said. Reaching the counter, he set the bag he was carrying up on the counter-top before reaching in for the jars stored in it. "It's not tomato sauce. Max has been trying to convince me to plant some fruit in the spring, maybe see if it's possible to move some of the berry bushes in the forest around the house closer to the garden, so she made me buy some berries and try cooking jelly."

"Oh. Jelly sounds great." Patrick leaned forward as Billy set the jars down on the counter. He laughed when he saw the little labels on the jars - pieces of torn of notebook paper taped down with the name of the berry in the center and a little drawings on the side. The one he was peering at had dancing blackberries on either side of the berry's name. "These are cute. Did Max make them?"

"No, that was Will. One of her friends." Will had sat the table doing the labels while Billy and Max worked on the jam. Billy had tried to get him to join them, Will wasn't exactly scared of cooking with them

but sometimes he got nervous about messing up what they were doing, but Will had fun doing the labels, concentrating on beautiful swooping letters and the colors he used for the berries. So Billy had eventually just let it go, making sure to turn the radio down enough that they could hear it while still being able to talk to each other. "He did a good job, didn't he?"

"Yeah." Patrick grabbed two of them, "I'm taking one of the strawberry and the blackberry, alright?"

"Sure." He looked at the other guys, "Any of you want some? I brought it in so I could get rid of it. We made way too much again."

There was a moment before Gabriel shifted to peer at the jars as well. "I'll take a strawberry off your hands. My mom loves strawberry jelly."

"You mind if I leave these up here?" Billy said, glancing at Richard. "I'm hoping Kevin might take a couple off my hands so that I don't have to take them home. I've got two jars in my fridge that the kids wanted to keep and I'm really hoping for that number not to increase."

"Yeah, sure." Richard reached forward to take two of the jars himself - the final strawberry as well as one of the blueberry. "You better be careful though, Billy. You're starting to seem like a farmer. Keep going and you'll have chickens running around your backyard."

Richard was obviously joking about the chickens, but Billy found that the idea sort of stuck in his mind as he went about his day.

It wasn't like there wasn't a benefit to having chickens around. It wasn't like eggs were very expensive, but with all the cooking they did they went through them fairly quickly and the idea of not having to pick them up so often was sort of appealing. It wasn't like the summer when he'd been rarely coming into town without Max, but he still didn't really want to go to the grocery store after work every

three or four days.

And hell, he had the land to build an entire fucking barn without even blinking at the space it took up if he really wanted. A chicken coop wouldn't be a big deal. They could probably even put it next to the house, to the left of the cabin since the vegetable garden was on the right.

The chickens would give him something else to do around the house too. They would be a lot of work, but even with his job Billy had more time than he really knew what to do with.

He was pretty sure the kids would like them as well. Back when he first moved in he wouldn't have considered anything like this since he wouldn't have had help, but Max was always did her share of the work with the flowers and was constantly researching to make sure they didn't mess anything help. He was sure she'd care about the chickens just as much as the gardens. And while Will didn't have the same enthusiasm about the flowers, Billy was pretty sure that he'd take to the chickens without much fuss. He was always willing to help with what he could. Even aside from that, Billy could tell that Will liked animals from the way that he talked about the Byers' dog and he didn't doubt that he'd love the chickens.

Still.

It wasn't the kind of thing that Billy really knew anything about, so he let the idea marinate, decided to do some research when he had the time and figure out if this was actually something that made sense.

Life moved on.

He took Max to school most mornings, occasionally stopping to grab Will when the boy knew his mom had an early shift and didn't want to wake up early to bike in, before heading in for his shift at work.

At work, he passed off whatever goods he had to get rid of - gave Patrick jars of tomato sauce so he could get his daughters to eat

spaghetti and blushed when his wife, Maria, came by one day and began praising him, Gabriel's mother ended up loving the jelly he gave her so Billy would leave jars of jelly and jam in the shops fridge for Gabriel to take when he was in for the night shift, argued with Kevin about Kevin's insistence that he and Max needed to make more pickles so he could have them. He ended up spending most of his lunch breaks reading through books on chickens and coops. Sometimes he'd skip eating to walk down to the hardware store to talk to Tony and his father Troy about what Billy could build given what they had in their shop.

After work he'd go home for a quick shower before heading over to grab Max, and Will when he didn't have AV club with the other boys, from school. He bumped into Harrington pretty frequently at the school and ignored the looks he gave him each time Will got a ride from Billy, like he couldn't fathom why Will wanted rides from Billy instead of him and was worried Billy had plans to eat the kids. Sometimes he dropped them off somewhere after school, taking them to the Wheeler's so they could do their nerd stuff or the arcade so they could all hang out or any number of the other hangouts the kids in Hawkins liked, and took them to his place when he picked them up afterwards. Other times neither of them had anything to do and Will's mother was working, so he'd take them back to the cabin right after picking them up.

They worked on the gardens as soon as they got home, doing some watering and harvesting and weeding. They wouldn't be alive much longer, not when summer had faded to fall and winter was going to be following soon enough, but Max was just as determined as always to make sure everything was healthy. He force both of them into the house afterwards, making them sit down and do their homework no matter how much they groaned and complained. He usually tried to fix them a snack to eat while they worked, doing his best to make something a little healthier because he knew Joyce Byers did her best to afford healthy food and he didn't want to ruin what she was trying to do with Will by giving him junk food after school, before sitting down with them. He'd read a novel while sitting at the table, something he wasn't too attached to so that he could put it down if either of them needed his help with anything.

If Will's mother wasn't working a long shift and Max didn't have to be home early, they'd make dinner together. Will was gradually becoming more comfortable in the kitchen with them. He started chopping garlic and cutting vegetables without much trouble, letting Max and Billy argue about whether to change the spices or measurements of things since he trusted they knew what they were doing. Often there was no dessert afterwards, but sometimes Billy would pull ice cream out of the fridge for them to eat until their fingers or they'd stumble their way through making brownies. Other times, they'd leave the house early when he had to take them home so that they could go together for ice cream.

It was, all in all, a better way to spend his days than anything he had known when he was their age.

"What's that?"

"What's what?" Billy asked, even though he already knew what Max was talking about.

Neither of the kids had been over the day before, Joyce had a day off so Will had spent the day with his mother while Max had gone on a date with Sinclair before Susan needed her home since Neil was back early from work. Billy had taken the opportunity to get the materials he needed and build the chicken coop he'd been planning. He was going to do it alone, but Tony had been at the hardware store when he went in and when he found out that Billy was finally building the thing they'd been talking about for weeks he'd offered to come over. They had developed a loose friendship over the last few weeks, so Billy had been happy for the help. Tony had supplied the power tools they needed and beer from his father's fridge, because Tony was only twenty to Billy's eighteen, while Billy bought the materials and enough pizzas to feed men their ages. They hadn't gotten drunk or anything given what they were doing, but they spent the afternoon beer-warm and sharing stories that made them laugh while they worked.

It had been a productive afternoon. And now there was a chicken coop made of dark wood stretching the length of the cabin. It was not just big enough for the number of chickens he planned on getting,

but for a few more if Billy ever decided he wanted them. They'd even put together a little greenhouse-esque area made out of glass where the chickens could sit in the sun during the winter without having to go out into the snow.

"The thing by the house," Max said. He could hear her shifting around in the backseat, trying to press herself closer to the window. The kids took turns in the front seat now, Max sitting next to him when he took them to school in the mornings or picked them up in the weekend while Will took it when he picked them up after school or dropped them off on the weekends. It was a bit of a toss up when he picked them up from something they'd been doing with their friends, the two of them usually racing to see who got into the car first.

"It wasn't there on Monday," Will observed.

"Nope. Spent yesterday building it with a friend."

"Okay, but what is it?" Max said.

As he drew up to the end of the drive, he told them, "It's a chicken coop."

"You have chickens?"

"Not yet. I found a guy outside of Edgewood willing to sell a few of his hens to me, though," Billy said. "As long as you two finish your homework early enough, we'll drive out there for food and get the chickens afterwards. He said he didn't mind us dropping by around six or seven if we wanted to get them today."

The kids exchanged a look, Will peering behind himself as Max leaned forward. Then they were both bolting out of the car, darting towards the cabin door.

Billy climbed out of the car, amusement flashing through his gut.

"Hey losers!" Billy shouted. The kids were all the way at the door now, Max reaching into the flower box for the spare key they kept taped under the lip, but Billy was still at the car. The door was open, his feet on the ground as he let the door rest against his back and laid his elbow on the top. He waited until they were looking at him before

he said, "Don't forget that you have to do the gardening before we can leave."

There was a moment where the kids exchanged another look.

Then Will shouted out, "Can you do it for today?"

Billy felt another flash of amusement. He didn't really mind the request though. While the kids did most of the gardening, Billy did it himself on days when they weren't around and worked alongside them on most days. There was a lot of laughter on those days, a lot of water splashed around and dirt smeared on cheeks.

"Fine!" he told them. "But you two better actually do your homework! No bullshitting me so we can leave earlier!"

By the time Billy finished everything outside and took a quick shower to wash up, Max had finished everything she had and Will was working on his last couple of math problems. September was hurtling towards October, bringing in the cold whether, so a lot of what was outside was growing slowly or not at all. He waved Max off to the kitchen, telling her to take care of the stuff in the bucket he'd set on the counter, before settling down next to Will and helping him.

When they were all finished, he had them bag their stuff up before herding them out to the car. The drive up to Edgewood was spent a lot like most of their drives - with conversation and laughter, with arguments about what to listen to and loud horrible singing, with the wind whipping everyone's hair around and Billy's hand hanging out of the window with a cigarette dangling from his fingers. It was Will talking about how he was doing paintings of everyone's DnD characters for his art project and Max complaining about Lucas always making her see his nerd movies instead of letting her pick and Billy yelling over their arguments that he didn't care what they thought of Metallica because he was playing it anyway. It was tapping his fingers against the wheel in time with *The Horsemen are drawing nearer on the leather steeds they ride* and Max struggling to get

her hair pulled up given that she was dancing at the same time while listening to *Karma, karma, karma, karma, karma chameleon. You come and go, you come and go* when they switched to the radio for a bit and Will trying his best to hit the high notes of *Galileo, Galileo, Galileo* when they put Queen's Great Hits in.

They went to dinner first since Billy didn't want to be in a restaurant while there were chickens in the camaro. He refused to get fast food or diner food since they were out of Hawkins, so instead they ended up at a chain family restaurant. Both kids wanted fries with their food, Will ordering chicken tenders and Max a burger, but Billy didn't want to return them to their mothers having fed them nothing except junk food so he made them both order salads as well. They tried to argue, but Billy ignored them while threatening to make them drink water instead of soda. The kids bombarded him with questions while they were eating - How many chickens were they getting? Were they getting hens or roosters or both? What type of chickens were they? What colors would they be? He answered each in-between bites of the pasta he'd ordered - three because he'd read that they should be kept in groups, only hens, the guy he'd talked to had suggested they take a few of his sussex chickens which meant they would be reddish brown with black and

And when Billy had answered all of their questions, they started arguing about what they were going to name them without letting Billy have any input.

"I don't think we should eat that."

Billy looked away from the package of chicken in his hand, giving Max his attention. "What?"

His sister was standing on the bottom of the grocery cart, leaning forward against the bar. Will was around the store somewhere, but his mom was working so he had been following her around while she did shelving. Billy had exchanged a small nervous sort of smile with Joyce Byers before leaving him to it, telling Will he'd let him know once they had checked out.

"Well...what if Starscream or Adora or Pebbles see us eating it?"

It had taken ages for them to decide on names for the chickens. In the end they had decided to name them all after cartoon characters. Will had chosen Starscream despite Billy arguing that if they were going to name one of them after a transformer they should've at least picked an autobot rather than a decepticon. Max had chosen Adora despite Billy arguing to name her She-Ra instead. Sick of their choices, Billy had swept in to name the final chicken after Pebbles from the Flintstones instead of Allura from Voltron. They were all of their chickens, but they were living at Billy's cabin so he was naming at least one of them after one of his favorite characters.

"And why would it matter if they saw us?" Billy asked, trying to figure out what exactly Max was trying to get at.

"It's chicken!" Max insisted. "What if they think we're going to eat them?"

He stared at her for a moment. Then said, "What the fuck are you talking about, Max? They aren't going to *know* that we're eating chicken, much less care."

"But what if they do! What if they smell it or something!"

"What else do you want to do, Max? Never eat chicken ever again?"

There was a long moment before Max said, "No. I just want to not eat chicken at the cabin."

"Well, I like eating chicken so you and the hens just have to suck it up."

"Billy!"

Mocking, he retorted, "Maxine!" The two of them stared at each for a moment before Billy let out a rough sigh. "We're not taking chicken off of the menu, Max. But if you want we can have less chicken than usual this week."

For a moment he thought she was going to argue but then she took a long breath. "Fine! I'll just work on convincing you."

"You do that," Billy said, because no matter how much he liked the

chickens he knew he wasn't going to stop eating it. Max, he knew, likely wouldn't stop eating chicken either. She'd likely drop it in a couple of days when it became clear that the chickens weren't going to have a meltdown at them eating their kin. There was no harm in eating a bit more steak and pork until then, or even longer on the off chance that it actually stuck. "In the mean time though - go grab pasta and rice. If we're cutting back on chicken, we'll have spaghetti and pork stir-fry this week."

"Can I grab bagel bites too?"

"Yeah, sure." She had only just taken a step away when he turned, calling out, "Track Will down and ask what type of snacks he wants!"

"Okaaaay!"

Billy wasn't going to stop eating chicken, but that didn't mean that he didn't love the hens they'd bought.

They each had their own personalities and Billy appreciated all of them in their own way. Pebbles was the top hen in the house, bossy and demanding when it came to the others. She pecked them when they got in her way, clucked at the kids when they didn't give her treats fast enough, and strutted around the yard as if she was the owner of the entire thing rather than Billy. Adora was a curious, silly bird. She was always doing her own thing around the yard, poking at new things and trying to explore what they'd told her repeatedly to leave alone. She never failed to run around with the kids or elicit a laugh from them. Starscream was, despite all of her name and namesake, the sweetest of the bunch. She liked to hang quietly around them when they were gardening or cluck around the porch while Billy sat there. Sometimes she would even sit on Billy's lap, let him lightly stroke her chest or wings.

Billy had known Will would like the chickens given how much he loved his dog, but he wasn't anticipating Will taking over the chicken care with the same enthusiasm that Max had taken over gardening.

While Max was always darting around the gardens, either the flowers and vegetables outside that were starting to finish for the season or the herb garden they'd started inside the cabin, Will had started heading immediately to the coop. He'd lay out food for them, give them attention and check out their feathers to make sure they hadn't rolled around in anything too dirty, playing with and talking to them as he checked their nests for eggs.

It was nice to see Will taking such an interest in them, nice to see that he'd given Will something that made the cabin his just like Max had the flowers for herself.

And the chickens brought all three of them closer together in the kitchen. Before Will had been mostly going along with what he was asked to do by Max and Billy, having fun with the laughter and music and dancing but not really interested in the cooking or pickling or jam-making the way they were. But then he read in a book that bread was a good treat for chickens and suddenly Will was interested in making bread rolls and donuts and other things they could hang in the coop for the chickens to jump at when they wanted a snack.

Billy enjoyed cooking with Max, but there was something a little more soothing about baking with Will - about mixing the doughs together and the repetitiveness of kneading and all the waiting as things rose or baked. It was its own little thing and Billy enjoyed it in a different way, just like he liked Will in a different way than Max. They were both important to him - both his kids, both his *siblings* - but they were different people that meant different things to him just like the flowers and the chickens meant different things to him.

Notes for the Chapter:

Hi everyone! I hope you enjoyed this chapter! I'm sorry it took so long - I've been on vacation and it was difficult to get writing done while also spending time with my family.

Chapter title is a rework of a George Eliot/Mary Ann Evans quote.

6. this is your life (and you don't regret it)

I'm going, I'm going," Billy insisted, cigarette dangling from his lips as he made his way across the yard. "Chill out, you demanding little bitch." The words were harsh, but they came out of his mouth with a teasing fondness.

And Pebbles didn't really seem to mind either way, just continued clucking at him as she followed him towards the coop and the feeder.

Starscream and Adora were both out in the yard as well, but neither of them seemed to care much about Pebbles freaking out. They'd both come to check on her at one point, but Pebbles had clucked at them until they backed off. Adora was now rummaging around the dirt near the cabin while Starscream was sat down in Billy's chair on the porch. He didn't really want any of the chickens up on the porch when he wasn't up there, but he had a soft spot for Starscream and he fond it sort of cute that had chosen to sit in his space since he knew he was her favorite just like she was his.

Shifting the bag of feed into his other arm, Billy took a drag of his cigarette before taking it from his mouth to flick the ashes off. He was careful of Pebbles moving around his ankles as he did, sure to flick them in a direction she wasn't and watching to make sure she wasn't going to try going near them. As he settled it back in his mouth, he murmured, "You've got some gull to act like I never feed you when I just had to take you to vet because Will was feeding you too many donuts, you fatass."

Pebbles shifted closer to him, her clucking growing louder and more frantic as if she understood that he was talking trash about her.

"Yeah, yeah. I know. Don't talk shit about the queen bee." She clucked again, though it was a slightly more satisfied sound. "You know, this is why Will's the only one who likes you." It wasn't really the truth, they all loved all three of the chickens even if Billy tended to favor Starscream over the other two. They were all his feathery girls. It didn't mean that he wasn't frequently far more annoyed with Pebbles than he was the others.

Pebbles must have known he was bullshitting her because her clucking started up again, a bit frantic and angry.

"Jesus, you really need to learn to take some criticism." He moved around to take another drag from the cigarette as he drew up to the coop. "Alright, shitbird. Chill out. I'm putting the feed in now. And I swear to god, Pebbles, as demanding as you've been - you better sit here and eat for a fucking hour."

"Billy! Will you trade me Marvin Gardens for Tennessee?" Will asked.

"Why the hell would I do that?" Billy shouted. He was in the kitchen, taking the garlic buttered chicken they were having for dinner out of the oven. He'd already pulled out the cheese potatoes that Max had insisted on having along with them and finished the green beans that they'd gotten in the garden's final harvest. Almost all of their plants were done now, the end of fall bringing in weather too cold for them to produce and survive. "Yellow is worth way more than orange."

"But you'd have a monopoly!"

"Yeah? And all you have to do to have one is land on Atlantic."

"Well, you aren't going to be able to get a Monopoly at all if you don't trade with Max or I!"

"Maybe I'll just trade with Max to get the red ones."

"What are you willing to give me for Kentucky?" Max said, joining the conversation.

"Hey!" Will said, voice raising and filling with indignation. "You two can't make trades on my turn anyway!"

Max argued, "It's a counter trade. You can't apply normal trade rules to counter-trades."

"It doesn't matter what it is because it's time for dinner." Billy walked over and stood in the doorway, letting out a sharp whistle as he leaned against the frame. Both kids looked away from their argument and over at him. He made a hand gesture, motioning towards the

kitchen. "Get in here and make your plates."

They both obeyed, pushing their chairs out and climbing to their feet.

"Can we keep playing after dinner?" Will asked.

Billy shifted to the side of the doorway so that they had room to get pass him and raised his arm so they could go under. "You guys haven't done your homework yet."

As she ducked under his arm, Max asked, "Can we play afterwards?"

He hummed a bit, thinking as he turned to look at the clock on the stove. It wasn't too late yet, but he didn't know how long homework would take. "We'll see what time it is when you're done. And if we haven't finished by the time I have to take you guys home, I'll leave it on the table so we can play again next time."

"Okay!"

As Will took his choice of the chicken breasts and moved onto vegetables, Max filling his space in front of the chicken as she searched for the piece she wanted, Billy moved towards the counter. He'd been hanging back so the kids could get started, wanting to make sure each of them got what they wanted, but he figured it was okay to get closer now that they both had plates going.

"Will, don't skimp on the potatoes," Billy told him as he waited near the counter next to Max, letting her take her time picking a piece. It didn't really matter which one she took since they were all seasoned and cooked the same, but sometimes the kids wanted the biggest pieces of meat and sometimes they wanted the smallest ones. "I know you don't like them, but you've got to eat them at sometimes so you might as well not argue when they're covered in cheese."

Will made a face at the dish in front of him before looking over at Billy, "You'll tell my mom I ate them?"

"Yeah," Billy agreed. It was strange to think about the fact that he actually did have a sort of relationship with Joyce Byers - one that revolved around discussing Will's homework and activities and what he'd eaten that day. He knew she was still sort of confused by his

involvement in her son's life, something Billy appreciated because it meant she couldn't see what he and Will had in common, but the longer Billy was in Will's life the less she seemed to mind. Almost like she thought Billy was a good influence for her son. "I'll drop Max off first so that I can talk to your mom about it when I drop you off."

Will seemed torn for a moment before sighing and reaching to pick the serving spoon in the potatoes back up. "Okay."

"Hargrove!" Billy turned his head, careful of the hood hovering just above him that he could easily bump into, to find Kevin coming towards him. Before he could greet him, his co-workers barreled on, "Are you babysitting this weekend?"

Billy thought about it for a minute, trying to figure out how to respond. He didn't think what he did was really considered babysitting - Will and Max weren't coming over because he needed to watch them, but because neither of them wanted to be home alone and Billy's cabin was their place as much as it was his.

What he settled on was, "I'm supposed to drop my sister off on a date." Then he asked, "Why? Do you need me to cover a shift for you?"

"Nope," Kevin said. Reaching the car Billy was working on, he leaned against the door while saying, "Richard's closing the shop at six on Saturday, so the lot of us are thinking of going out drinking. Myself, Richard, Patrick and his wife, the night shift guys. Scott might bring his new girlfriend, but he hasn't decided yet. I thought you might want to come along if you weren't babysitting."

"Oh." There was a warmth that bloomed in his chest, from being invited to something like this. It was meant to be fun, but there was something personal and close-knit about it given the people that were going. There was something a little colder that came with remembering that, "I can't drink, though. They changed the drinking age to twenty-one last year, remember?"

"Yeah," Kevin said, but his voice was casual and dismissive. Like he hadn't forgotten about the drinking age, it just didn't matter in light

of his plans. "But we're going out for dinner instead of drinking at a bar, so you can come with us without worrying about not being let in. And since you drive, you can take our drunk asses home when none of us can walk because we've had too many overpriced cocktails."

"You're inviting me so you'll have a DD?"

"No. We're inviting you because we want to have dinner with you," Kevin said. "You DDing is just a plus."

"Oh." The warmth in Billy's gut seemed to grow even larger, pushing until Billy felt like he was going to burst at the seams. He couldn't remember the last time someone had invited him somewhere, much less when someone had invited him somewhere because they genuinely wanted him around rather than because inviting Billy to a party was just the thing you did.

"So? You coming? Or do you have to watch your sister?"

"Like I said - I have to drop her off for a date," Billy said. "But I'm sure someone else can pick her up."

"Well, let me know if they can't okay? We can go to dinner a little later if we have to. Patrick might actually show up on time if we have dinner late. He's always like thirty minutes late because he doesn't know how to say goodnight to his kids and trust their babysitter."

Billy didn't think anyone had ever offered to post-pone their plans so that he could be part of them. "Yeah, okay. I'll let you know."

"Hey kid," Billy greeted as Will approached him. He was sitting on the hood of the camaro, having been waiting for Will to get out of school. "You ready to go?" He took a long drag from his cigarette before tossing in front of him and hopping down to grind it under his foot.

"Yeah." Will's voice was questioning, but he wasn't exactly asking when he said, "Max said she wasn't coming with us today?"

"Nope. She's headed home so her mom can take her to the dentist."

"Oh." There was a beat before he said, "I don't think I've ever actually been alone with you like this."

Billy hesitated for a second, considering. Then he asked, "Are you okay with that?"

Will hummed, the sound light, and gave a nod. "Yeah. Max is cool, but I'm not really used to having to share since Jonathan and I only had each other."

He laughed a little bit, pleased to be compared to Jonathan if only because it meant Will saw them both as brothers, and reached over to mess Will's hair. He ducked under Billy's touch, but there was laughter on his lips and a smile on his face.

After a few moments, Will spun out of Billy's grasp and took a second to fix his hair while Billy laughed at him.

As Billy went to move towards his side of the car, still chuckling to himself, Will asked, "Since Max isn't here, can I pick the music?"

"You think I let her pick the music when you aren't in the car?"

"Sometimes."

"Fair enough," Billy said with a small shrug, because Will wasn't exactly wrong. It was a lot rarer for him to let Max pick the music when they were alone, they went pretty much fifty-fifty nowadays when they were all together since it only seemed fair and the kids usually didn't pick things he hated, but it happened on occasion. "What do you want to listen to? If you pick something bad, I will take your radio privileges away."

Will seemed to think about it while getting in the car and strapping himself in.

As Billy was getting ready to pull out, Will asked, "Can we listen to that one Clash album you have?"

"Sure." He gestured towards the dashboard, "It's in there somewhere. You'll have to dig for it."

"Okay." Will leaned forward to rummage around, pushing tapes around in search of the one he wanted. Billy double checked that he hadn't taken his seat-belt off, Max had an unfortunate habit of taking it off every time she had to move around the car, before easing the car forward. As he made his way around towards the parking lot exit, Will said, "Can we make rolls for the chickens today?"

"Didn't we just make doughnuts for them a few days ago?"

"Yeah and they've eaten them all so now we need to make them something else."

"This is why they're so fat," Billy said, glancing over at Will. The teenager shrugged. Focusing back on the road, Billy added, "We have to go to the store then. We need yeast if you want to make bread."

Slipping off a glancing kiss to those who claim they know, below the streets that steam and hiss, the devil's in his hole.

Billy bobbed his head along with the song as he moved around the windowsill, peering at the ceramic pots filled with herbs that were set up on the ledges.

They'd planted the herb garden several weeks ago, because Max had wanted something to do when their garden was out of commission for the winter. Michelle had told him herbs were a good thing to grow inside, so Billy had bought seeds and pots and dirt from her before taking everything home. The next time the kids had come over, they'd been eager to get everything set up and to give the herbs a good start before winter settled in fully.

While Max had been the one to fill the pots with dirt and plant the seeds inside of them, Will had contributed to the herb garden by drawing doodles on each of them as decorations. He'd taken his time with each of them, insisting on getting them perfect before he'd given them to Max for filling, and drew patterns that covered the entire pots. There were clocks of all sorts set to various times on the thyme pot, roses in dozens of colors on the rosemary, and scattered peppermints on the mint. He'd gotten a bit more stumped when it came to cilantro and parsley, so he'd covered the pots in swirling

veins in green gradients.

Much like with the garden, the herbs were mostly taken care of by Max - her first stop each time that she came into the cabin. Will usually helped her with the vegetables and flowers, but he preferred running out to check on the chickens to helping her with the little pots and Max didn't seem to mind doing the work herself since it was a lot less intensive than the other gardens.

But neither of the kids were around today - Will was spending his mother's day off with her while Max was playing perfect families with Neil and Susan at a dinner thrown by one of Neil's co-workers - so Billy was taking care of the herbs. He didn't mind doing it. Working on things outside was nice, left him with a strain in his biceps and callouses on his hands and let him get rid of the energy thrumming through his veins on days when he was filled with it, but working inside was nice in it's own way as well, let the tension seep from his shoulders as he moved across the pots and bob his head along with the music he'd chosen and have calm rolling over him like waves lapping at the beach.

He'd just been listening to the music he had playing from the stereo, but as he moved to water the rosemary, he started murmuring along under his breath, "Into the sun, the south, the north, at last the birds have flown. The shackles of commitment fell in pieces on the ground."

The music was loud, turned up far past what he'd been able to have if he still lived in his father's house, but Billy's chest was filled with contentment and happiness.

"Alright," Billy said, holding the bowl of eggs over the volcano of flour on the table. He had his hair pulled up into a bun, keeping it out of his face so he could see better, and wore a loose white muscle tank despite the weather outside. He was glad he'd picked a shirt he didn't care about because he and Max had barely started this endeavor and he was already covered in flour. "You sure you're ready?"

"Yeah," Max answered. She was seated in one of the chairs, a fork in

her hand as she waited for him to pour the eggs into the middle of the flour. Her hair was pulled up just like his, but they clearly hadn't done it quickly enough because there were spots of flour in her red hair already. He already knew he was going to have to shove her into the shower before he took her home later, making sure she was clean enough not to catch

The two of them were alone for dinner today, Will had been over for a bit right after school but Billy had dropped him off at Mike's since the boys were playing DnD and having a sleepover, and they'd decided that it was a good night to try making their own pasta for the first time. It was the sort of new thing that that Will still got a little overwhelmed by when he cooked with them, so Billy had thought tonight was a good time to attempt it.

"You remember what you have to do?"

"Uh huh. Bring the sides down into the eggs, slowly mixing it."

"And being extra careful not to break the ring."

"And being extra careful not to break the ring," she repeated. She looked at him, starting to look a little annoyed by his questioning. "Come on already, Billy."

"Okay, okay," Billy said. Carefully, making sure that he didn't fuck up and ruin the flour cone, he poured the eggs into the carved out center of the flour. Once they were there, he set the large bowl down and reached for the bottle of olive oil sitting nearby. He poured a little bit of that in before putting the cap back. "Alright, go ahead."

"Got it."

Billy settled down in one of the other chairs, watching Max with a careful eye. He had boxed pasta in the cabinet incase this went really horribly, but he really didn't want to bust that out. Both because Max was clearly very excited about making the pasta and because he was pretty excited about it as well.

There was something about making pasta that was exciting and fun. It was cool and new and something that he knew most people didn't

do. And there was something about that which Billy got a strange amount of empowerment from, because Billy couldn't think of very many things about himself that were special. Making pasta wasn't that difficult or that special, but it was a small something and Billy enjoyed the way it made him feel.

"Hey! Do you think I could stay over tonight?" Tony shouted from the living room.

"Sure," Billy said, grabbing the bowl of popcorn off the counter before making his way out of the kitchen. Tony was sprawled out on the couch, back pressed against the arm of it with his legs spread out on the couch and one of the throw blankets the kids had picked out spread out over him. The horror movie they were watching - Halloween, which was the fourth of the night - was flickering on the TV screen in front of him. "Why though?"

It was a few nights before Halloween. The two of them had gotten talking about Halloween movies the last time Billy had been downtown, he'd just dropped by to say hi while picking up some snacks but Tony had been on his lunch break and he'd ended up hanging around to talk to him, and that had somehow turned into them having a scary movie marathon after Billy dropped the kids back off at their houses.

"Because we've been watching horror movies and you live in the middle of the fucking woods," Tony said. "I'm fucking scared out of my mind. It feels like if I try to drive home, I'm going to find some psychopath sitting in the middle of the road before I even reach the main road."

"You giant baby," Billy said. The word was a little harsh, but his tone was teasing and amused.

He couldn't remember ever having a conversation with another boy like this - talking and joking about what scared them. Tony was a few years older than him, but Billy couldn't remember ever being friends with a boy this close to his age and feeling this comfortable rather than feeling like he had to do whatever he could to keep himself above them. There was something freeing about it, about having a

male friend who was just a *friend* without any of the competition of other boys or the pea-cocking that came with boys Billy was attracted to.

"Damn fucking straight." He held his arms out, making grabby hands in Billy's direction, "Give me the popcorn."

"Are you going to spill it all over the floor again?"

"Possibly, but that is just a possibility we will have to live with."

Billy passed the bowl to him before reaching for his legs, grabbing at his calves and pulling. "Move your ass so I can sit down."

"Sure, sure." Tony shifted easily once Billy let go of him, moving so his legs were still on the couch but were crossed under him rather than taking up all of the cushions. He rested the popcorn bowl, glistening with the butter and salt that Billy had poured on it, in the pit of his legs. "Do you want me to rewind? Or are we good to keep going?"

"Just keep going," Billy said. With Tony's feet moved, he was able to flop down onto the couch next to him. He reached behind him, pulling down the pumpkin covered blanket he'd been using earlier, Will and Max had picked it out when he'd taken them to a department store a few towns over for some Halloween decorations, and throwing it over his legs. "We still want to get to Rosemary's Baby, right?"

"Yeah," Tony said. As they both moved around to get comfortable now that they were both on the couch, he added, "Though, I'm fucking scared out of my mind and I might actually have a heart-attack once we get to the scary shit in that one."

Billy watched as Will and Max ran off towards Steve Harrington's BMW in their Halloween costumes. The two of them were dressed as He-Man and She-Ra for the holiday, having made plans for their paired costumes ages ago. He'd heard from them that Dustin had been upset about it, wanting to do a group costume like the boys had apparently done the year before, but he figured he'd gotten over it.

Once the kids had crammed themselves into the car and Steve had pulled out, Billy found himself standing alone on Joyce Byers porch.

He hadn't felt too awkward earlier, when he'd first brought Max over so that Joyce could take pictures of the pair - she'd even gotten one of Billy with both of them and Billy alone with Max - before they went out trick or treating, but now that the kids were gone he found himself feeling incredibly out of place.

He was wondering if he could just leave or if he should duck inside to say goodbye to Joyce before hand when he heard the door creak as it opened.

Billy turned, glancing over his shoulder to find Joyce coming out of the house with a pack of cigarettes and a lighter in her hand.

"Getting ready to head out, Billy?" she asked. If it had been anyone else speaking, it would have sounded like he was being rushed out. Coming from Joyce's mouth, it sounded like a question were either answer was alright.

"Yeah," he said, feeling a little relieved for the out. All of the kids were having a sleepover at Harrington's at the end of the night, so he could go back to the cabin without needing to come pick Max up. Billy was a little skeptical of the whole thing, not really understanding why Harrington wanted the kids sleeping over at his place, but neither Will or Max acted like Harrington had ever touched them or spoke about him badly so he'd kept his mouth shut about the whole thing.

"Well be careful alright?" Joyce cautioned, voice hard and face serious. "It's a long, dark drive out to your place. And you live in a pretty thick part of the forest."

Assuming she was just talking about him being careful of teenagers doing stupid shit out in the woods on Halloween, he said, "I'm sure I can handle whatever comes at me."

Her face twisted, emotions that Billy couldn't name flickering across it. In the end, it settled on concern and she repeated, "Just be careful, okay? Will and Max would be absolutely destroyed if something

happened to you."

"I don't know about that," Billy said with a little laugh.

The amusement was quickly drained out of him when Joyce caught his eye, though.

"That's not true," she told him, voice so sincere that her words that Billy felt them in his bones. "I might not know why Will chose to start hanging out with you and Max, but I do know that you love those kids, Billy, and that they love you. They would have no idea what to do if you weren't there for them anymore."

Notes for the Chapter:

Hello everyone! It's a bit different stylewise because this is sort of a transition chapter, but hopefully you all enjoyed this chapter!

7. tis the season and other scary things

Despite the cold November night air Billy sat on his front porch with his legs stretched out in front of him, the fuzzy flower covered throw blanket that Max had chosen when they first when furniture shopping wrapped around himself to stay warm, and a mug of hot chocolate cradled in his hands as he peered at the sky above him.

His nights outside had dwindled once Winter had started settling in, but once the house had gone quiet, the kids taken over to Dustin's for a sleepover hours ago, Billy mind had wandered to his father. He'd gone outside to escape the demon in his memories, choosing instead to make himself comfortable with cold air stinging his face and the sounds of the forest filling his head.

And it was because he was paying so much attention to the noises in the forest that he heard when it changed.

He heard the crunching and rustling of leaves as something moved through the trees, but those were familiar noises. There were plenty of things living in the forest and almost none of them ever broke through the tree line. He kept an eye on the trunks of the trees for a few minutes, making sure that nothing was going to come attack the chicken coop, but when nothing happened he allowed his gaze to shift back up to the sky.

He heard the voices in the forest, not quite screaming but not quite whispering, but their words were difficult to make out and it wasn't like it was the first time he'd heard someone around the cabin. There had been plenty of times when teenagers causing trouble or drinking somewhere away from their parents had wandered close to his property. He allowed his ears to start tuning them out, focusing on the stories running through his head that Will had told him about constellations.

It wasn't until a few moments after their appearance that Billy started paying attention.

Because his thoughts were broken by the same voice echoing in his head saying, frantic and scared in a way that had Billy instantly

pushing to his feet- "This way, this way!"

And a voice that Billy vaguely recognized but couldn't place responding, more wispy and out of breath, "Should we be heading towards light? We shouldn't take them towards people!"

"It's okay!" another all too familiar voice said, a girl whose voice Billy had spent years listening to just to make sure she never sounded as scared as she did now. "We'll just run inside and close the door!"

"Run inside?" Another familiar voice, lower and deeper than the others. Billy wasn't anywhere near as familiar with Harrington's voice as he was Will and Max's, but it had featured in his fantasies enough times that there was no way he wouldn't know it when he heard it. "You can't just run inside random people's houses, guys!"

"It's not a random person!" Will said. "It's-"

"Billy!" Max shouted as the group broke through the tree line. She and Will were leading all of their friends, and Harrington, across the property.

Billy might have shouted at her to explain to him what the hell was going on or ask why she'd brought all these people here without his permission, but Steve had only barely cleared the trees - all of the kids in front of him while Steve brought up the rear with a baseball dripping in something black that Billy couldn't name - when something else came out of the forest.

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The pack of creatures following the group almost looked like dogs, but their faces were giant pink flowers with sharp teeth in the center. And there was nothing friendly about the way the petals were squirming towards the kids nor the growls he could hear from their mouths.

Instead of questioning, he threw himself backwards towards the door and yanked it open.

"In, in, in, in!" he screamed, moving his arm frantically even through the kids were still leagues out. Fear pulsed in his chest, harsh and heavy in a way he hadn't felt in ages. Maybe in a way he hadn't felt

ever. "In, in, in, in!"

The first couple of minutes after everyone was in the house, Billy darting into the house behind Steve and slamming the door shut once he was in, were frantic. The kids were darting around, all trying to peer out the windows even as Steve and Billy tried to push them away from anything that might break or give if one of those monsters launched at it too hard. And then Billy found himself drifting towards his kids, looking them over with a still frantic heartbeat.

The growling outside of the cabin was still going on, but seeing that Max and Will were okay - their faces were red from exertion and they both had leaves in their hair but neither of them had any cuts or bruises - had Billy calming down. His heart was still thumping faster than usual, but it gave him the steadiness he needed to demand an explanation about what the fuck was going on.

Even with his request for a response, Billy found himself unable to sit still. So he walked to the kitchen, motioning the others to follow because he didn't think he could handle Max and Will being out of his sight while he heard about the danger they'd been in, and started making everyone cups of hot chocolate.

The other kids just sort of lingered around, gawking at the scene in front of them like Billy with his hair pulled up and fuzzy pajama pants on was the strangest thing they'd seen that night, while Max and Will helped him.

His kids did the talking while they worked.

Will started out, rambling to Billy about everything that had happened in Hawkin's before Billy had moved as he chopped chocolate and ignoring the way his friends tried to stop him from revealing information about the girl they called Eleven. There was something about the way Will just blatantly ignored them, continuing

his explanation without hesitation because no matter what they said Billy was not just someone he trusted but someone who he trusted completely and without reserve, that made the affection Billy already felt for the boy expand in his chest. And Billy would have taken the news of Will's 'death' rough no matter what, but with that warmth in his chest Billy found himself digging his nails into his palms to keep from satisfying the urge to reach out and touch Will, to make sure that he was really there and safe.

Max told him what had happened since they'd moved as she measured out cups of milk and poured them into the pot for him to boil. And Billy had been trying really hard to get over the shit that had happened in the winter, because he knew how much of it was his fault, but he heard what sort of danger Max had been in while Harrington had been lying to him about her location and rage boiled in his gut. It had taken several deep breaths to stop himself from flying at him, several moments of focusing on the smell of the chocolate in the air and the fact that Max was in front of him without a single scar or bump on her person.

By the time the night ended, the demodogs having stopped bumping against the house long enough ago that they probably weren't waiting in the woods to attack, Billy felt like he was drowning in information and his head hurt from trying to absorb everything that he'd heard.

But as he was driving the kids to Steve's car and as he was driving Max and Will home afterwards, there was a sense of safety and security that settled in his chest. Because the world was a bit more of a dangerous place, yes, but Billy knew it was dangerous now and that meant he could be there for his kids when they needed him.

Billy was sitting in the camaro in the high school parking lot, twisted around so he could search around the mess the kids had made of the backseat for the case of the Mötley Crüe album he'd just taken out since he knew the kids wouldn't want to listen to it, when he heard a sharp knocking on the window.

He barely avoided the urge to jump, fingers digging into the seat he was clutching for a second and hands tightening around the junk he'd been pushing aside. Cheek pressed against the side of the drivers seat,

Billy took a deep breath before pushing himself backwards.

He took a second to settle back down in his seat, composing himself after the scare, before shifting to see who was stood beside the car.

Steve Harrington stood on the other side of the passenger door, arms wrapped around himself despite the black wool coat he was wearing and his cheeks bitten red. It wasn't the first time they'd run into each other at the high school - they saw each other pretty much every day since Steve was Henderson and Sinclair's ride home now that the weather was too cold for the kids to bike - but it was the first time Steve had ever approached him while they were there.

Curious, Billy reached out to roll the window down.

"Harrington," Billy greeted.

"Hargrove," Steve returned. Both of their tones lacked the anger and rivalry that their names had held when they'd been in school together. "Unlock the doors and let me in."

Billy raised an eyebrow. "Why would I do that?"

"So we can talk."

His eyebrow went even higher. "And why would I want to do that? We're not friends just because of the shit that happened the other night."

"No," Steve agreed. There was something almost soft about his expression, quiet and knowing, "But I think there's a lot about the other night that you might want to ask about and that you might want to talk about. And there's lots of stuff about the Upside Down and the kids and stuff that I occasionally want someone to talk to about. I figure we're the only two people our age that know about it, we might as well talk to each other about all of it."

Billy stared at him for a moment, mind swimming with everything he had seen and heard that night.

And then he reached over, unlocking the door and gesturing inwards. "Take a seat, Harrington."

When they were in high school, Billy's feelings on Steve Harrington had been complicated and hard to articulate. Steve Harrington, with his swooping hair and his doe eyes and the thin but muscular body, was gorgeous. Billy, suddenly so far away from the familiarity of cold sea air, felt heat race up his spine for the first time in ages and Billy, even with his arm only days out of the cast that his doctor had put on after Neil had found Billy in his bedroom with Scott Johnson, wanted. But Steve Harrington's gaze glazed over everyone in the hallways except Byers and Wheeler, not exactly like he was better than them but like he hadn't given any of them a second of thought because they weren't worth it. And that was infuriating in a way that Billy couldn't properly articulate, even more so with the memory of the words Neil had spat at him while Scott ran out of the window.

Things were easier with Harrington now that he was graduated, though.

Harrington was still gorgeous, but Billy hadn't lived in Neil's house in almost half a year and it was easier to look at pretty boys without feeling like he was the scum of the earth. And now Billy knew that Steve specifically didn't think the school was below him, just that Steve had gone through shit with Byers and Wheeler that had changed them in a way that meant they really only fit with each other and the kids.

And, in the days after that first conversation in Billy's camaro, he realized that the thing was true now - only it was Billy and Steve that fit together in a way that they didn't fit with others. Because while Billy cared intensely for the people he'd gained since moving out to the cabin and wasn't going to push them away on account of the new information he'd gained, there were times when Billy was filled with words that only Steve would understand.

Those were the times when the only thing Billy could do was slip into the passenger's seat of the BMW or gesture Steve into the passenger's

seat of the camaro, when one or both of them lit a cigarette with shaking hands and kept the windows down despite the bitterly cold air so that they could have something to focus on, when words of fear and worry and horror spilled from both of their mouths and when they let their secrets burrow under each others skin.

It was strange to know Steve so intimately without knowing the surface things about him - his favorite color, what foods he liked, which movies he went to see - but in some ways that was why it was so easy to speak to him. Billy and Steve shared this secret that they couldn't share with anyone else, and in sharing those secrets they were both able to look past the facades that had them bumping heads throughout their Senior year.

"Hey twerps," Billy greeted as Max slipped into the passengers seat, Will moving into the backseat at the same time. Steve had left a few moments before, slipping out of the camaro and back over to the BMW once kids started flooding out of the high school. "How was your last day?"

The only reply he got was some lackluster murmuring, but Billy wasn't really surprised.

The kids had been pretty exhausted the last couple of days. They were both good students, but Hawkins Middle School didn't do exams and they had found themselves run ragged by their first experiences with them. Billy was proud of them, though. They had been struggling, but they'd both been getting through things and that was what counted.

"You guys hungry?" he asked as he shifted out of park. As he pulled past the BMW, he could see Steve looking over at the passengers seat as he argued about something with Henderson. Vaguely, Billy wondered if there was anything capable of bringing that kid down. "I'll treat you to something since you worked hard this week."

There was some shifting around, Max glancing into the backseat and the kids exchanging a look Billy couldn't quite make out while he was driving, before Will said, "Could we go to the burger place by the mall?"

"Sure." It wasn't usual for the kids to want to go there, it wasn't usually anyone's top choice since it had only been around a year and Hawkins was loyal to it's local restaurants, so he asked, "Did you guys want to hang out at the mall afterwards?"

"Yeah," Max said. "But you can't come with us."

Confused, Billy said, "I can't come?"

"No."

Glancing over with one raised eyebrow, he asked, "What exactly are you two up to?"

"We're not up to anything," Max objected. "We just can't pick out our Christmas presents for you when you're with us."

"Oh." And there was part of Billy that wanted to argue against the kids getting him something, but there was also a part of him thinking about how he had never gotten Christmas gifts because someone wanted to buy them for him. Neil and Susan had always gotten him one or two things, but they had been cheap and he knew that it was only so that Billy would have a response if someone questioned him about the holidays. There was part of him that couldn't bring himself to say anything against this thing that the kids saw as a way for them to do something and give him something after-all they gave them, and Billy knew his kids well enough to know that was what this was even without them saying it. His voice was a little thick as he said, "Alright. We'll go get burgers then I'll drop you guys off at the mall while I go get chicken feed."

Billy hadn't exactly forgotten about Christmas, but he'd never been much for the season. It was hard to get excited about something like that given that major holidays meant Neil being home for the entire day, forcing Billy to stay as well and yelling if he stepped a toe out of line.

But he didn't live with Neil anymore.

And there was something infectious about the way Patrick asked for everyone's opinions on what gifts he should give his daughters because he wanted them to be perfect and walking into the shop in the morning to find Gabriel and Scott sporting reindeer antlers, about Tony constantly carrying around his mother's sugar cookies so that he could eat as many as possible before the season was over and all of the decorations Michelle had torn around the flower shop, about the way Will worked so hard on all of the art he was planning on giving to his friends and how much thought Max was putting into the gift she wanted to give Lucas.

Billy didn't care that much about the holiday, but he cared about his family and his friends and it was hard not to get sucked into something they all enjoyed so much.

He found himself taking the kids to a tree lot a few days after they got out of school. Tony came along with them so that they could use his truck to bring the tree back to the cabin. The four of them wandered through the stacks, Billy and Tony sipping on cups of coffee and talking quietly as the kids argued about height and weight and color while drinking hot chocolate. When they finally decided on a thick pine tree of medium height, the older boys passed their coffee off to the kids and wrestled the tree into the truck before strapping it down.

The four of them went to buy some ornaments before heading back to the cabin to have dinner together, but once dinner was done Tony took off. And when it was just the three of them, they turned on one of the stations that always seemed to be playing Christmas music and worked on decorating. They sung loudly while dancing with tinsel around their shoulders, chatted idly while undoing the tangles in the lights they'd bought, and argued over whether to use more of the silver or gold ornaments. But when everything was set up, the kids having finished putting the star on the top, Billy found that was pretty pleased with the entire thing.

Notes for the Chapter:

- 1) Hello everyone! I hope you enjoyed this chapter!

A lot of the events in this chapter were supposed to take place later in the fic, but it ended up feeling right here tbh.

2) The beginning of Steve and Billy's relationship!
It'll build more in the future chapters, but slowly.

8. rudolph, frosty, santa claus

"Alright," Billy said, walking out into the living room with a large bowl of caramel popcorn in his hands. The overhead lights were off, but between the colored lights on the Christmas Tree and the glow of the TV, the room wasn't really too dark. "Did you two decide on something yet?"

Max and Will were settled together on the couch. Max had Billy's comforter wrapped around her shoulders, having plucked it off his bed once they'd started calming down after dinner because she claimed it was too cold. Will was covered in one of the throw blankets that he'd bought, a black one with blue and grey strips that looked more like a towel than a blanket but was surprising soft and smelled like vanilla from the time Max had thrown groceries down on it too hard and exploded a bottle of extract all over it.

They'd been sitting closer together, but once Billy entered the room the two of them shifted apart. It wasn't the quick sort of jumping apart that came with kids doing what they shouldn't, but a slower thing born from the expectation that Billy would sit between them.

"Not really," Max said. "Can we watch two?"

Billy hummed a little bit, considering.

Will was staying the night, Joyce had been working night shifts and now that Jonathan was away at school she preferred Will to stay with Billy instead of alone at home, but Max had to be back by her curfew. They probably had enough time to watch two movies, but it would be cutting it close. Getting Will home a little late or squeaking right in before his curfew wasn't a big deal, Joyce just laughed it off.

Max being late had higher stakes, though. Billy was far too familiar with the consequences of being late in Neil's house. And while Max still hadn't said anything about Neil touching her and still didn't have any bruises, Billy wasn't willing to put her in a situation to start it.

Still.

They were kids and they were his kids and he always had a hard time telling them no.

"If we watch two, then you guys have to be up and ready to go afterwards so we can make Max's curfew," he told them. "No sleepy arguments or refusing to get up or anything. You have to get up and put your shoes on when I tell you."

"We will!"

Billy glanced between the two of them for a moment, trying to decide if he thought they would actually follow the rules set forth. After a moment, he nodded and moved to sit down in the spot they'd made for him. "Fine. What are we watching then?"

"Alvin and the Chipmunks," Max said. "And then Mickey Mouse."

"Alright," Billy said. He wasn't really surprised at their choices. He'd let them grab a couple of things when they were at the video store since they'd been spending more time at his place now that they were out of class, but he had sort of known they were going to lean more towards the animated movies than *Miracle on 34th Street*. "One of you go put it in. I got the popcorn, you guys can do the movie."

Billy would never it say it to either of the kids faces, but as much as he loved his busy days with the kids, there was something to be said about the quiet nights he spent with them. There was something about sitting in front of the TV once the sun had gone down with a movie that the kids had picked flickering on the screen, with the three of them arguing about characters and laughing at the jokes they heard. There was something about the warmth of Max pressed against his side as she used him as a backrest and Will's head falling against his shoulder when the boy started falling asleep. There was something about those quiet nights that rung with feelings that Billy had been so deprived of in his childhood - that rung of quiet intimacy, that rung of being wanted, that rung of happiness and contentment and love.

When he'd been living in Neil's house there'd been a vague feeling

that he was being dramatic about everything, that his life wasn't that bad because even if Neil hit him a little harder it wasn't like he was the only person getting hit and that his life wasn't that bad because even if Neil didn't give a shit about him it wasn't like he was the only person whose father couldn't care less about them.

There were still moments now that he lived in the cabin, though, that he realized how bad things had been because he realized how *good* things were now. Because now when he got hungry in the middle of the night, he could leave his bedroom to heat up leftovers or find a snack instead of laying in bed hungry so that he didn't have to worry about the consequences of waking Neil up. Because now when the kids held hands up for high fives or came running at him for a hug after he agreed to something they thought he'd say no to, he didn't flinch as much as he used to because while it would be a long time before he forgot what Neil did to him, he also was already starting to remember that touch didn't have to mean a beating. Because now he had lunch with Michelle at the flower shop on Friday afternoons and spent Saturday nights having fun with Tony and had a standing invitation to Sunday dinner with Patrick's family, because now Billy had real friends who cared about him and helped him realize that no matter what Neil said he *was* likable and worth spending time with.

There was a lot Billy had been deprived of as he grew up in his father's house, but now those things were worming their way into his life and Billy found that they made him happier than he had ever been before.

Billy followed the kids into Scoops Ahoy, eyes up on the board of flavors as he tried to figure out what he wanted.

Usually when he took them for ice cream they went to the parlor in downtown Hawkins, but he'd brought them to the mall today so that they could buy gifts for their mothers. Will had chosen a silver ring with his and Jonathan's birthstones in it. The stones were fake, part of why the ring had been cheap enough for Will to feel comfortable looking at it, but it was a pretty and sturdy piece of jewelry that they'd both agreed his mother would like. Max had found a nice apron in one of the cookware stores that her mom liked. Billy had

paid for both gifts - because Joyce Byers deserved something nice and because for all Susan's flaws she was his sister's mother which meant something to Billy even if he hated the woman herself.

Once everything had been taken care of, though, the kids had asked for ice cream and Billy didn't particularly mind buying.

The menu at Scoops was a bit more like the menu at ice cream places in California than the one at the Hawkins Parlor, though. It covered a large variety of flavors, toppings, and cone options.

He was so busy trying to figure out what flavor he wanted that he didn't notice who was behind the counter until a familiar voice called out, "Ahoy mateys! How can I help you today?"

The words were enough to have amusement coiling in Billy's gut, and it only grew more when he looked down and saw the outfit Steve was wearing. There was an uncomfortable warmth that came with the look, but Billy was well versed in shoving that down.

"Harrington," Billy said, unable to keep his laughter from his voice, "I can not believe that when you were telling me about your job, you didn't tell me about this this uniform."

A year ago, the words would have rankled at Harrington, would have started a fight between them.

Now they were something like friends - and Steve just groaned as he leaned forward against the counter, the thinly veiled professionalism dropping as he realized who the customers in front of him were, "This is exactly why I didn't mention it."

"Because the surprise is so nice?"

Steve rolled his eyes, looking like he wanted to stick his tongue out at Billy the way the kids they both spent so much time with did.

Billy just laughed at him. Sometimes, he was surprised by how easy friendship with Steve had become. A lot of their recent relationship had been heavy with the secrets they shared, but recently they'd started talking more casually and it was always fun. Steve was fun to tease, and even more fun when he teased or gave attitude in return.

"Can we get our ice cream now?"

Billy glanced away from Steve, giving Max his attention.

"Sure," he told her, noting the strange look on her face and the irritation in her tone. Max rarely ever copped an attitude with him, usually happy to sit with Will and wait if Billy was doing something, so it was a strange change. Worth storing away even if he didn't think it was a big deal. "Tell Captain Harrington here what you want."

Billy didn't really spend much time in the mall since his place of employment was downtown and his closer friends lived downtown, but with Christmas coming up Billy found himself spending more time there as he shopped for gifts for Will and Max, as well as driving the kids to find gifts for people in their lives.

Spending time in the mall quickly turned into spending more time with Steve.

At first it was just the two of them chatting at Scoops when Billy brought the kids by, because he was a sucker who bought them ice cream pretty much every time they were shopping even though the temperature outside was dipping closer and closer to the negatives. The two of them would chat about kids from high school that had dropped by Scoops, gossiping about how other people's lives were looking now that they had all graduated, or commiserate about the insanity of the kids they had both shackled themselves with, ignoring the protests that Billy's kids tried to raise when he was complaining about them, while Billy leaned against the counter and Steve made their orders.

When he started coming to the mall alone, finding gifts for the kids that they couldn't tell each other about, he started spending Steve's lunches or breaks with him. The two of them would sit together in the food court, Billy's bags by their feet, and talk until Steve had to go back to work. Those were the days when Billy learned that Steve was just as much of a gossip as everyone else in Hawkins, that he always always always drank cold drinks too fast and ended up with a brain freeze, that he liked really mainstream music and he couldn't be bothered to be ashamed about it even when Billy teased him. When

Steve was on break rather than lunch the two of them would walk around the mall together, looking at gifts for the kids and other people in their lives. Steve helped Billy pick out an art kit for Will that wasn't expensive enough for Joyce to cringe at someone else having bought it but was expensive enough that Joyce wouldn't have been able to get it for him, helped him pick out a couple of really soft sweaters that Max would like since she rarely ever received new clothes, and helped him decide to get Gabriel a poker set even though he'd never met the man.

Billy had known he liked having Steve around from their interactions at the school, taking about everything they had gone through that no one else knew about, but hanging out with him around the mall made him realize just how much he enjoyed spending time with Steve when they weren't just talking about how terrifying the forests of Hawkins could be.

"Mom!" Will called. Max and Billy followed him into the Byer's house, each carrying aluminum wrapped dishes. "Max and Billy are here!"

Billy glanced around the living room as he entered it, taking in all of the faces gathered in the room. The Byers house was familiar after so many weeks of weekly dinners and hauling Will around, but usually it was just Max, Will, Joyce, and Billy. Now every seat was taken and there were a few bodies on the floor as well.

All of the kids were there, as well as a brunette girl that Billy didn't know. Then there was Chief Hopper, sitting next to Joyce on the smaller couch in the room. The group was wrapped up by the other kids Billy's age - Steve, Jonathan, and Nancy Wheeler.

"Oh," Joyce said, smile bright as she pushed herself up off the couch. "I'm so glad you two made it!"

"Yeah, of course," Billy said, even though it hadn't been that easy. He'd had to meet up with Susan which hadn't been great since he wasn't a huge fan of the woman. Then he'd had to convince her to ask Neil for permission for him to take Max to a party on Christmas eve even though it was a 'family' holiday. Then there'd been the whole process of Susan and Max both working on Neil to get him to say yes,

and the fact that Neil had been standing in the doorway when Billy showed up in the camaro to pick Max up earlier that day. "We wouldn't have missed it."

Joyce hummed, the sort of sound that came from knowing Billy well enough now to guess that things weren't entirely as he was saying but also knowing that pushing more would only put Billy in a bad place. She shifted her gaze from his face to his hands, saying, "You brought food!"

"Yeah. I made those green beans that I brought a while ago that you liked so much - the ones with the bacon." He lifted the dish in his hand, adding, "And then this one is dessert. Max wanted to try doing a yule log, so we made an attempt at that. It's a little messy, though."

"I'm sure it'll be delicious," she assured. "Everything you and Max make tastes good."

"I don't know about that. I'm sure we've messed up a couple of times."

"One time we tried making butternut squash ravioli," Will said, still standing at Billy's side with Max rather than having darted forward to his friends. "It was pretty gross."

Billy made an agreeing sound, as Max shivered a bit beside him. "Yeah...It wasn't great."

"Well, everything you've ever brought me as been delicious," Joyce said. She reached out to take the dish that Max had in her hands, adding, "Max, why don't you and Will go sit with the other kids? Billy and I will take these out to the kitchen."

Max looked up at Billy for a moment, as if she was asking permission. It was unusual for her, but right now Neil had them both a little on guard from things he'd said to Max before she'd left and the way he'd looked at Billy as he waited for her in the car.

"Go ahead," he said, tapping his elbow lightly against the back of her head since his hands were full. "I'll be out in a couple of minutes."

Max hesitated for just a moment before nodding. "Okay."

Christmas Eve at the Byers ended up being a pretty nice affair.

It was a little awkward at the beginning of the day, most of the kids were used to Billy being around by now but Jonathan and Nancy were clearly thrown by his presence and the kids genuine acceptance of him, but as time went by Billy focused on the people he was familiar with and let himself relax.

He ate dinner with Will and Max on either side of him, making it easy for him to settle into the same routine of conversations and arguments that they had on days when the three of them ate together at the cabin. Steve had drifted towards Nancy and Jonathan at the beginning of the night and during dinner, catching up with them after so long apart, but afterwards he'd started hanging out with the kids and Billy had found it easy to settle in at his side, teasing and laughing and joking like they always did. As the night had calmed down, Billy had found himself sitting next to Joyce and talking quietly about how things had been going and what they would be doing once Christmas passed by because their daily lives had become very intertwined.

It was simultaneously a nice quiet evening and a rowdy noise-filled family event.

And all together, it left Billy with a warmth in his gut which had been increasingly familiar since he'd moved out of his father's house. It left him with the feeling that for once in his life, he was starting to see why it was that people cared so much about family holidays.

Notes for the Chapter:

Hi everyone!

I hope you enjoyed this chapter!

It didn't make it into this chapter but Billy spends Christmas Eve with the Byers and Christmas with Patrick & his family.

9. the snow is falling and friends are calling

"Billy!" Patrick said as soon as he'd pulled the door open. Billy had been a little grumpy about the cold weather, hunched down into his jacket to stop snowflakes and cold biting winds from reaching his face. It hadn't worked very well, but just being a little further down in his coat had made him feel better. What really warmed him up, though, was the sight of Patrick with felt reindeer ears covered in green and red jingle bells. "Hey, buddy! Come in, come in!"

Billy didn't have time to respond before Patrick was reaching out, putting his hand on Billy's shoulder.

He was wearing a long sleeve shirt, a hoodie, and the thickest wool coat he'd been able to find in the store, but Billy swore he could feel Patrick's hand against his skin.

His father had put his hands on Billy's shoulders a lot, bending down to his height and keeping his grip tight when Billy was a boy and then resting it there as claw-like fingers dug into Billy's skin once he was older.

Patrick's touch felt different, feather-light and warm as he pulled Billy into his home with a large grin on his face.

It was easy to follow that sort of touch, to let Patrick pull him into his house.

Patrick was closing the door behind them when Maria's head popped into the entry hall, peering out from the room that Billy knew was the kitchen from his previous visits. Her black curls fell around her shoulders instead of being pulled up like usual and a Santa hat rested on top of them.

"Billy!" she said, a smile breaking out as she spotted him. She stepped out into the hallway, moving towards him with open arms. "You made it!"

"Yeah," Billy said. "Sorry I'm late."

"Oh, it's no problem. We were just worried something had happened to you. Christmas snow is wonderful, but no one takes care of the roads out where you live and I know you aren't too used to driving in a storm like this."

"Driving was fine," Billy said. It had been a little rocky back when the snow had first started in Hawkins, but Billy had adjusted quickly. Max and Will had been helpful motivators. The idea of anything happening to them because Billy didn't know how to drive in snow or on ice had been terrifying. "I just couldn't find the presents I got the girls, because Max put them away after she wrapped them and I wasn't sure where she set them." Lifting the tray in his hands, he added, "And the asparagus took a bit longer to cook than I thought."

"Presents out in the camaro, Billy?" Patrick asked. Billy looked over his shoulder to find the older man already reaching down for his boots. "I'll grab them so you don't have to go back out."

"Oh. I can-"

"No, no, no," Maria cut off. Billy turned his attention to her, finding she was a lot closer than she had been and was reaching for the dish in his hands. "You brought food and presents even though you didn't have to do either of those things. Let Patrick brave the storm for you."

"Are you-?"

"Sure?" Maria finished. "Absolutely. Come on, let's get you out of your coat and boots. Then we can go to the living room so you can say hi to the girls. They're super excited to see you. They've been talking all day about showing you what they got from Santa."

Billy still wasn't exactly sure why Patrick had invited him to spend Christmas day with his family, but he couldn't deny that he was happy to be there.

It wasn't just that the alternative was sitting home alone on Christmas, but that the family made him feel warm and welcomed. He wanted to be with them - hearing the annoying jingling of the bells on Patrick's antlers and being teased in a warm, fatherly way instead of the vicious insults Neil hurled at him, watching Maria's constant movement as she ducked between the kitchen and living room. He wanted to be with them - even with Caroline, their oldest daughter, begging to do his hair and put make-up on him since she'd gotten a nice kit for Christmas, even with Patricia, their second, trying to get him to agree with her as she tried to insist she didn't need to eat vegetables with dinner, even with Julia, the youngest, crawling all over him and letting out loud giggle-shrieks too close to his ears. And even though he wasn't really one of them, Billy /felt/ like he was part of their family the entire time he was there - both during visits before Christmas and on Christmas.

As nice as it was, though, Billy would find himself with a strange unsettled feeling in his chest when the family calmed down and silence lapsed for a while.

He had a family, he had Max and Will and further from that he had Patrick's family and Joyce Byers and Tony, but he didn't have this sort of family. Neil had never been the sort of father to use that soft amused tone of voice Patrick used, he'd preferred insults and shouting. Neither Susan or his mother were the type to invite someone to spread Christmas with their family and make them feel welcome, his mother had made him feel like a burden and Susan preferred to act like he was wasn't there intruding on her perfect life. Max...He and Max were siblings now, but for a long time they'd simply been on opposite ends of a spectrum, sneering at everything they each represented.

In those silent moments, Billy found himself remembering those things about his family more than anything and feeling further from the family he was surrounded by then ever. It was in those quiet calm moments that Billy found himself feeling a little bit like everything he had built for himself was a lie. His bond with Patrick's family and his relationship with Max and Will and the friendship between himself and Tony. All of them were so much better, so much more important and meaningful, than anything he had had the year before that

having all of them now felt like he was cheating, like he was holding onto something that wasn't meant to be his.

But Billy had always been a selfish person and those moments just made him want to clench his fist tighter around the people he loved so that he wouldn't lose them.

"Mad Max or Rambo?"

"Is that the first Mad Max or the one that just came out?" Billy asked. He didn't turn around to look at Tony while he spoke, focused on the candy in front of him. He was planning on getting some chocolate as well as runts and skittles for the two of them, but he was considering buying some other stuff. Not for movie night, but for the kids to have next time they had a movie night at the cabin. "Because I never saw the first one."

"You never saw Mad Max?"

The exclamation hadn't come from Tony, but from Steve and Billy found himself looking up in surprise because Steve definitely hadn't come to the video store with the two of them.

Steve was standing a few feet away from Billy, wearing dark jeans and an extremely soft looking black coat. He was still wearing his gloves and had snow in his hair that hadn't melted yet, so he hadn't been inside for too long.

Standing just a little bit behind Steve, but clearly there with him, was Robin Buckley. Billy knew who Robin was, the two of them had a silent mutual agreement born from Billy noticing Robin watching Tammy Thompson too much and Robin noticing how little Billy cared to be kissing Tammy Thompson, but he hadn't realized that Steve and Robin knew each other, much less were close enough to be spending New Years Eve together.

"Nope," Billy said. "Came out at a bad time for me."

"Well, I think that means we have to rent all three Mad Max movies and spend all night watching them." Tony slipped into the space by

Billy's side, easily and without hesitation. He always did. It always rung a bell in the back of Billy's head, a reminder of things Neil had said about how no one would want anything to do with him if they really knew him. There were things Tony didn't know about Billy, and things Billy didn't know about Tony, but neither of them were ever ashamed to be by each other's sides. "Though I'm pretty sure I'll be so hammered by the end of the first that we won't make it to the third."

Tony's father had bought quite a bit of alcohol for Tony when he'd told him his plans for the night, saying he was fine helping Tony out if all Tony wanted it for was to watch a bunch of movies and play a couple of games at the cabin rather doing anything potentially dangerous up in Indianapolis like some of the younger people in Hawkin's liked to do, so Billy had no doubt the two of them were going to be plastered. "Probably, but we can always watch the third another time."

"Fine by me," Tony agreed, and there was that familiar sort of lurch in Billy's stomach that came from Tony expressing his desire to continue being friends with Billy and spend more time with him. He looked over at Steve and Robin, saying, "Hi! You guys must be friends of Billy's?"

Billy opened his mouth, about to say something to the effect of them just knowing each other from high school, only for Steve to speak first. "I am, yeah. Robin went to school with us, but the two of them don't really know each other."

"Hard thing to do at Hawkins High," Tony said.

"Well, I didn't go to Hawkins High for very long," Billy said. He wasn't really sure why, maybe because Steve had all but said they were friends and had come over to talk to Billy with no provocation and the whole thing felt strangely nice, but he found himself asking, "Do you two have plans tonight? Because if you're just going to hang out and watch movies, you could come out to the cabin and watch Mad Max with us."

Steve looked over at Robin, who met his gaze.

There was a stretch of silence as the two of them looked at each other, having some sort of silent communication which Billy hadn't realized they were close enough for, before Robin finally shrugged.

"Hanging out at the cabin sounds fun," Steve said, looking at Billy. "Robin and I were going to grab pizza after this, so we'll pick up some extra and meet you out there. What toppings do you guys like?"

Billy regretted the decision to invite Robin and Steve over almost immediately after he and Tony stepped out of the video store, heading back to the cabin with the movies while the other pair went to get the pizzas Steve ordered.

It made for an awkward drive, but Tony seemed to understand that Billy was nervous. Instead of striking up a conversation, he'd rolled the windows down so they could feel the sharp, cold breeze sweeping through Hawkins forests and turned up the radio. Instead of talking, Billy listened to Tony's soft murmured singing and the rushing of the air passing them as he tried to figure out what the fuck he'd been thinking by inviting Steve and Robin to his place.

In the end....In the end, it turned out okay.

It was a little awkward when Steve and Robin first arrived, filling with Tony trying to wade the conversation around Billy's awkwardness and Robin doing her best to meet engage Tony even while Steve stared at Billy with confusion in his eyes, but then they all took two shots, grabbed pizza and cocktails that Robin knew how to make for some reason, and set the first movie up.

Things loosened up once they were eating and watching, Tony quoting bits in ridiculous voices and Robin questioning things that didn't make sense and Steve got into arguments with Billy over Billy's constant guessing about what would happen next. It was loud and fun. He didn't have any idea what had actually happened in the

movie though, missing half of the lines to laughter and conversation. By the end of the first movie, Billy's face was warm with alcohol and sore from laughing so hard.

By the end of the night they were all plastered and bruised, Tony from falling off the couch while laughing while Robin and Billy's were both from an intense UNO game between the first two movies and Steve from getting his ass kicked by Robin in a wrestling match for the last piece of pizza. But they were the sort of bruises that Billy hadn't realized existed, the kind that he looked at and barely felt the pain because the memory made him erupt into laughter.

He'd never really had real friends, kept himself at a distance from everyone to keep the secrets folded under his skin.

When he went to sleep that night, flopping onto his bed with Tony while Robin slept on the couch and Steve slept on the floor near her, he found himself thinking that maybe it'd be nice to open up like this a bit more.

He'd been learning slowly since he'd left his father's house how great family could be.

Now he found himself thinking that maybe it was okay to have more than just that, that maybe he could open up to Tony without keeping him at an arms length and maybe he could let others, like Steve and Robin, in instead of keeping them as distant acquaintances.

"Billy!" Max said as she made her way down the Wheeler's front steps. The little black dufflebag with all of her sleepover stuff hanging off her shoulder and her pillow in her arms. Will followed after her with a much bigger bag that Billy assumed carried a bunch of stuff the kids used for Dungeons and Dragons as well as what he needed for the night and a small throw blanket that was wrapped around his neck like a scarf.

"Hey twerps," Billy greeted. As she neared him, he reached out to ruffle her hair. "Have a good night?"

"Yeah, it was fun."

He gave her head a light push, telling her, "Go put your stuff in the trunk, okay?"

"Kay," Max said. As she moved past him, she peeked in through the window he'd left open and said, "Hi Tony."

"Hey Max," Tony greeted from where he sat in the passengers seat.

He looked over at Will, "Fun for you too?" He knew that Will had been having a hard time being around Mike recently, what with Will's feelings for him and Mike's growing relationship with his girlfriend.

Will nodded, a smile on his face that reassured Billy. "Yeah."

"Good." He gave Will's hair a quick ruffle as well before shifting off of the camaro's hood, "Put your stuff in the trunk and then run inside to tell the others Steve is on his way, will you? Henderson and Sinclair need to get their stuff packed. And tell Wheeler he needs to get ready to leave too."

The two groups had split up when they left the cabin, Billy and Tony coming over to grab Max and Will immediately while Steve ran Robin home so she could change her clothes and drink a cup of coffee.

"Alright," Will agreed. Then he added, "Why though?"

Billy was pretty glad that he hadn't asked why he knew that Steve was on his way. He wasn't stupid enough to think that the kids, as freshmen in high school, didn't know about alcohol and parties. but he didn't really want to explain how they had gotten plastered the night before.

"We're all going to go out for breakfast together, give all your parents a little bit longer by themselves."

Billy had already planned on taking Will and Max out for breakfast, because Neil was particularly bad the morning after a heavy drinking night and keeping Max out a little bit longer before taking her home wouldn't hurt, so it wasn't like Susan and Joyce were expecting them home soon. They'd be out a little later given just how many people

were coming out with them now, but it wasn't like it would raise any flags for Susan, much less Joyce.

"Won't we beat everyone else? Since Steve isn't here yet?"

"We have to make a stop before the diner. Tony wants to take a shower and change his clothes."

"Okay."

"Alright." Billy put his hand on Will's shoulder, pushing him gently in the direction of the car. "Go put your shit away so we can get going."

Between Billy's group stopping at Tony's place and Henderson taking (as usual) a ridiculously long amount of time to get all of his stuff around, Billy ended up pulling into the diner at the same time as Steve.

Getting enough tables together to fit all of them wasn't that big of a deal, but it was even less of one when Tony was there to flash a mile and charm the waitresses. Billy had learned since the beginning of their friendship that a sure fire way to get what you wanted in Hawkins was to have Tony or Tony and his father with you, because they seemed to know every business owner and worker within the entirety of downtown Hawkins.

Getting everyone sat down was a much larger affair - because Max wanted to sit between Billy and Robin because she wanted to talk to Robin, but Lucas wanted to sit with Max as well and Will had clearly had his fill of Mike for now, because he loved his best friend but he also *loved* his best friend, but Mike couldn't take a hint so he wanted to sit with Will and Dustin wanted to be next to Steve but was also disgusted by Lucas trying to ditch him to sit with Max. It was a whole big kerfuffle getting everyone settled, taking far more time than getting tables set up had.

Actually ordering took a while too - between Dustin's running

commentary on everyone's choices, Tony flirting with the waitress, the kids shifting between sweet things like pancakes and their need to feel a bit older by ordering eggs or something more traditional, and Steve and Robin arguing about Robin wanting a fourth cup of coffee even though they had to go to work soon and Steve didn't want to deal with her being wired the entire shift. By the time they had all actually placed their orders - Mike the only one who actually committed to being more adult in their order which had Billy rolling his eyes because he really didn't understand why Will liked this pretentious little shit - Billy was mildly annoyed and considering strangling every single one of them.

Still...

Billy couldn't think of very many mornings better than this one, much less very many times when he had started the new year out so well.

Because Tony was cute, all swooping brown hair and honey brown eyes and freckles across his country tan skin even in mid-Winter, but the waitress knew him from high school and was clearly just humoring him. Because the kids bickering was usually pretty hilarious and today wasn't any different, especially with Max being so enamored with Robin. Because Billy had liked Robin well enough when she was drunk at his place, but with three and a half cups of coffee in her she was even wittier and more fun than she was drunk and Billy genuinely enjoyed talking to her and teasing Steve with her.

Because it was sort of a pain in the ass to get them all settled at the table, but once they were settled Billy was just reminded of how much better his life was now that all of them were in it.

Notes for the Chapter:

1) Hello! It has been a while! I got stuck on a fic before this in my updating order, so it took me a while to start this.

2) I wasn't going to write Christmas day, hence why I mentioned it in the notes of the last section where Billy spent Christmas, but now I've decided to do so.

And as such - I hope you are all having a great holiday season no matter what you are celebrating!

3) Happy New Year!

10. the world won't stop turning - not even for you

Billy listened idly to Max and Will's chatter as they crossed the parking lot. a bag of chicken feed over his shoulder while Max carried a bag of raisin-sunflower mix that they'd bought as a treat.

They were talking about some sort of math packet that they'd been given by their teacher for the winter break, which they had to have done by their return to school next week but which few of their friends had actually made progress on.

"I looked everywhere and I couldn't find a single problem like that one," Max told Will. "I feel like I spent an hour just looking over every example problem in the chapter for an answer."

"I haven't gotten that far in my set yet," Will said. "I could skip ahead if you want and try to help you with it when we get back, if you want."

"Yeah, maybe. I can help you with the ones that I've already finished if you want? I'm pretty sure my answers are right."

Billy was about to offer his help, it'd been a while since he did freshman math but he'd done well enough in school to keep Neil from complaining about his grades and so much of what they learned built on each other that Billy felt confident he could at least check their work, when the bed of the truck they were passing caught his eye.

There was a woman sitting on the tailgate, feet dangling off, with a large cage next to her. She had an animal in her lap, the same as the ones in the cage but larger, that she was stroking her hand down the back of.

"Is that a rabbit?" Billy asked, coming in a stop as he peered at her. He'd seen a lot of different animals since moving to rural Indiana, but rabbits were a first for him. He couldn't remember ever having known anyone with one either, though he'd known several girls in California who wanted one.

"Yup," the woman confirmed. She was an older woman, her thick

curly black hair spotted with a bit of gray that suited her well. She looked away from the rabbit, meeting Billy's eyes with a small smile on her lips. The rabbit in her lap was a rich brown color, stark against the light blue of her jeans. "This little girl got out of her pen and came back to us pregnant. We're picking some stuff up for our other animals than taking the little guys to the vet."

"Can we pet them?" Max asked.

"Sure." The woman shifted a bit, bringing herself closer to the edge of the tailgate so that the kids could reach out to pet the rabbit in her.

Max shuffled closer, glancing at Billy for a moment as if asking his permission as well. He reached down, taking the bag of treat mix and gesturing his head in response.

Will hung back for a moment, watching as Max reached out to pet the large rabbit - murmuring about how soft it was - and asked about its name - Chocolate chip. After a moment, however, he shifted a little bit closer and reached out as well.

There had been a lot of things recently that when asked how they happened, Billy would shrug and say that he had no idea.

The rabbits, though.

The rabbits he *honestly* had no idea why or how he ended up with them.

Because for all that Billy claimed not to understand why he'd ended up with the garden or the chickens or all the jam jars in his fridge, it ultimately came back to the kids. Because the kids had fun and Billy liked spending time with them.

When it came to the rabbits though, the kids had just been enjoying petting them. There hadn't been any pleading eyes or mention of taking them home, nothing more than a momentary enjoyment.

It had Billy who opened his mouth and asked the woman in the truck, Ellen, if she would be willing to sell him two of them. The kids had perked up, excited to hear what she had to say, afterwards but

the words had come entirely from Billy.

And he had no idea why he had said them.

Except...Except Billy had wanted a dog when he was six and had always been told no. He'd asked Neil for almost a year, begged to bring home strays that he found on the street or a new puppy from the litter of a classmate's dog. And he almost got one - when Neil brought over a friend who's dog had gotten another pregnant and who was looking for places for the dogs to go. But the animal Neil's friend had watched Billy with weary angry eyes, had snarled and snapped when Billy approached.

It wasn't the dogs fault, Billy knew that now. Knew all too well just how much it wasn't the dogs fault.

But - He'd never quite shaken it.

And the rabbits were small and soft, staring up at him with sleepy beady eyes and twitching ears.

Nothing like that dog.

Nothing like Billy.

"Hey there popsicle." Billy looked up from his hands, still blowing on them and rubbing them together, to find Robin looking at him from behind the movie store's counter. She was leaning against the surface, one elbow propped up so she could rest her chin against her hand and a magazine open in front of her.

"Hey," Billy greeted. He stomped his feet against the rubber mat on the floor. "It's fucking freezing out there."

"So what, it's like....fifty five degrees?"

"Fuck off." It came out with a lot less heat than the words usually did when they came from Billy, or maybe not because he'd found himself incredibly fond of most people he interacted with nowadays and rarely felt the need to get defensive about their teasing. "You all alone today?"

"For now anyway. Steve's coming in a couple of hours from now." Billy hummed a bit in acknowledgement as he walked towards the counter. "Why are you here so early?"

"Will left his homework at my place last night. Figured if I was going to drive all the way back in to town, I might as well find something to do other than just dropping by the high school for thirty seconds."

"That's what you get for living in the middle of nowhere."

"Probably," Billy said, because he didn't particularly have any defense for that. He had learned that for all that he had enjoyed the city when he lived in California, living in the middle of the woods suited him. It was better for him, gave him more space to stretch and still feel safe. "What are you reading?"

"Seventeen." She lifted one side, showing Billy the bold slanting lettering that he saw on shelves every time he was shopping and the face of an actress he couldn't quite remember the name of. "It's the only one in this whole store that I haven't read six times already."

"Anything interesting?"

"The Blush Factor: How to cope with embarrassment."

"By burying it all down under sixteen layers of bravado and the willingness to punch anyone who mentions it?"

"Yup," Robin agreed.

Billy let out a laugh as he leaned against the counter, peering down at the article she was open to and scanning over the tips it actually gave. He didn't get embarrassed, tended to jump straight to angry after years of conditioning, but the kids did.

He had meant to just stop in, see if Steve was in and say hi, maybe see if there was anything new out that he might want to watch that night or that the kids might want to watch over the weekend.

He ended up staying for most of Robin's shift.

The two of them had spent a little bit of time together when all of the kids wanted to get together for something and Steve had Robin with him upon picking them up from school and Billy had thought she was cool enough, but he had never quite known how to interact with Robin. Thrown off by her place by Steve's side, the two of them always in reach of each other and exchanging glances that said a million things without them opening their mouths. He'd been...not exactly threatened by her or jealous of her but something similar. Something just a little calmer and more painful, more like understanding and resignation. He'd thought Robin was something to Steve that Billy could never be, or that she would be if she wasn't already.

But the longer he spent there that morning, the more Billy realized that what Billy and Robin wanted from Steve were completely different things. It was in the things he could see mirrored in their faces - the way that they averted their gaze from certain photos, in that secret quiet way that was barely noticeable else they're aversion draw attention to them, with eyes that were dark with lust-shame-fear. The way Billy's fingers twitched a little bit in longing-want-need when Robin mentioned Steve. The way that Robin had kept forgetting to turn the page when a group of girls Billy vaguely recognized from high school entered, one of them in the center of the group sending Robin an easy smile and waving in a way that spoke of familiarity.

And it was enough for Billy to relax, to feel a little more calm around her and realize how much they shared, how much they clicked.

Robin was sharp and quick witted. The two of them leaned against that counter reading through stupid magazines and judging the stupidity of the advice, the particularly stupid outfits worn by the rich and famous, the absolutely insane products advertised as if they were perfectly normal and reasonably priced. There was a mutual harshness and judgmental tone in their opinions, born of the experiences they shared with each but not with Steve and his backyard pool or Tony and his successful thriving family business. They weren't quite the same, Billy was harsher and more hardened, but but here was a camaraderie to the familiar anger and frustration they shared.

And in the end it was a nice morning, filled with laughs huffed under their breaths and mocking impressions and too much candy stolen from behind the counter.

"Billy, we finished with the drive!" Max shouted as she came rushing into the cabin, the door just barely avoiding hitting the wall behind it and Will darting a hand out to keep it from smacking him in the face as he followed.

"Watch the door," Billy warned her. He set the two mug in his hand down on the table, filled past the rim with whipped cream and with chocolate shavings on top. The kids came stomping towards him immediately, murmuring thank yous as they each grabbed a cup for themselves. "I will make you sit in the snow while I work on it if you fix it."

He wouldn't, and they both knew it, but she murmured an apology anyway.

"Can we go out for ice cream?" Will asked. "Since you said you'd take us where we wanted if we took care of the car."

Billy hummed a bit, considering. He didn't really want to go get ice cream in the middle of winter, but he also hadn't been expecting that when he told them he wasn't going anywhere unless he dealt with the snow he hadn't been expecting them to literally shovel a path from the camaro to the road. And he couldn't deny that the path was convenient for more then just today - he hated the cold and the snow and so rather than shoveling himself he'd just spent 45 minutes every morning trying to get the camaro out and hoping it wasn't stuck.

"Where do you want to go?" Billy asked. Scoops had been the go to place over the summer and fall, but now that Steve and Robin had quit and started at the movie theater there wasn't much reason to go there unless they were going to the mall.

"Hawkins Parlor is fine," Max said.

"Alright, drink your hot chocolate while I get ready. We'll go out after." He added, "But if we get on the road and they're still horrible,

we're coming back here and not leaving until I take you back home."

"Okay," Will agreed. "If it's too bad out, can we stay the night?"

For a moment it sounded like the kind of thing that Will would just suggest, born from having a mother who was always stretched a little too thin and worried about her boys.

But then Billy took in the way Max was staring down at her mug, the line of her shoulders which looked just a little too tense.

And Billy felt fear spike through him - because Susan was away for the weekend with a friend, leaving Max home alone with Neil. Billy had assumed she'd been over ever day for the past few because she'd been bored, but now he couldn't stop thinking of all the other possible reasons that Max would be desperate to stay away.

"Yeah," Billy said, trying to keep his growing panic out of his voice. "That's fine."

In the end, Billy took them to get ice cream without too much fuss. The roads were icy, but Billy had learned that driving over ice while shared shitless of sliding was just something he had to live with while living in Hawkins.

As the kids sat down on the stools at the counter and shed off the heavy outer clothes they wore, Billy's eyes darted around Max's body. He searched frantically for something out of place - looked for cover up on her jaw as she shook snowflakes out of her hair, for any stiffness in her movements as she wrestled to get out of her winter coat, a wince as she and Will bumped shoulders and spun their stools and laughed.

He didn't notice anything, but it only made him worry more. He was intimately acquainted with all of this - and while Max didn't have his experience with playing basketball through bruised ribs or covering up choke marks, Neil had almost two decades of experience making sure he didn't hit the visible places. Almost two decades of making sure Billy was still wearing shorts in the California summer, still wearing tank tops in gym classes.

And what made the whole situation worse was sitting there and knowing that he couldn't let Max stay the night.

Even if Billy had the courage to call Neil and ask him, something that Billy wasn't sure he *could* do, he would never allow her to stay the night with him. Anytime Max stayed the night, Susan was the one who told him - and usually she told him a lie, telling him that Max was with one of her friends. There was no way Neil would like Max stay with him.

She couldn't stay with him - but he couldn't send her back either, not when he didn't know what - if anything - was going on. Not when he didn't know if she would be in danger or not.

She was his *little sister*.

He spent most of the time they were at the ice cream parlor feeling lost and afraid and sick.

Then while watching Max and Will argue over which one of them got to have Billy's cherry, it came to him.

Because Billy wasn't alone anymore, it wasn't just him versus Neil. There were people who cared about the two kids in front of him - and people who cared about him.

And Joyce Byers was a good woman who trusted him, who wouldn't ask any questions if Billy brought both kids to her house and asked if Max could stay the night there. A good woman who wouldn't have any problems calling Neil Hargrove and telling him that she just didn't feel safe letting the kids drive in this weather - that she would bring Max home herself when she left for her morning shift.

Notes for the Chapter:

1) Hello everyone. Sorry this took so long! I hope you enjoyed.

2) The article Robin and Billy talk about is a real Seventeen magazine article, just probably not from this specific month/year